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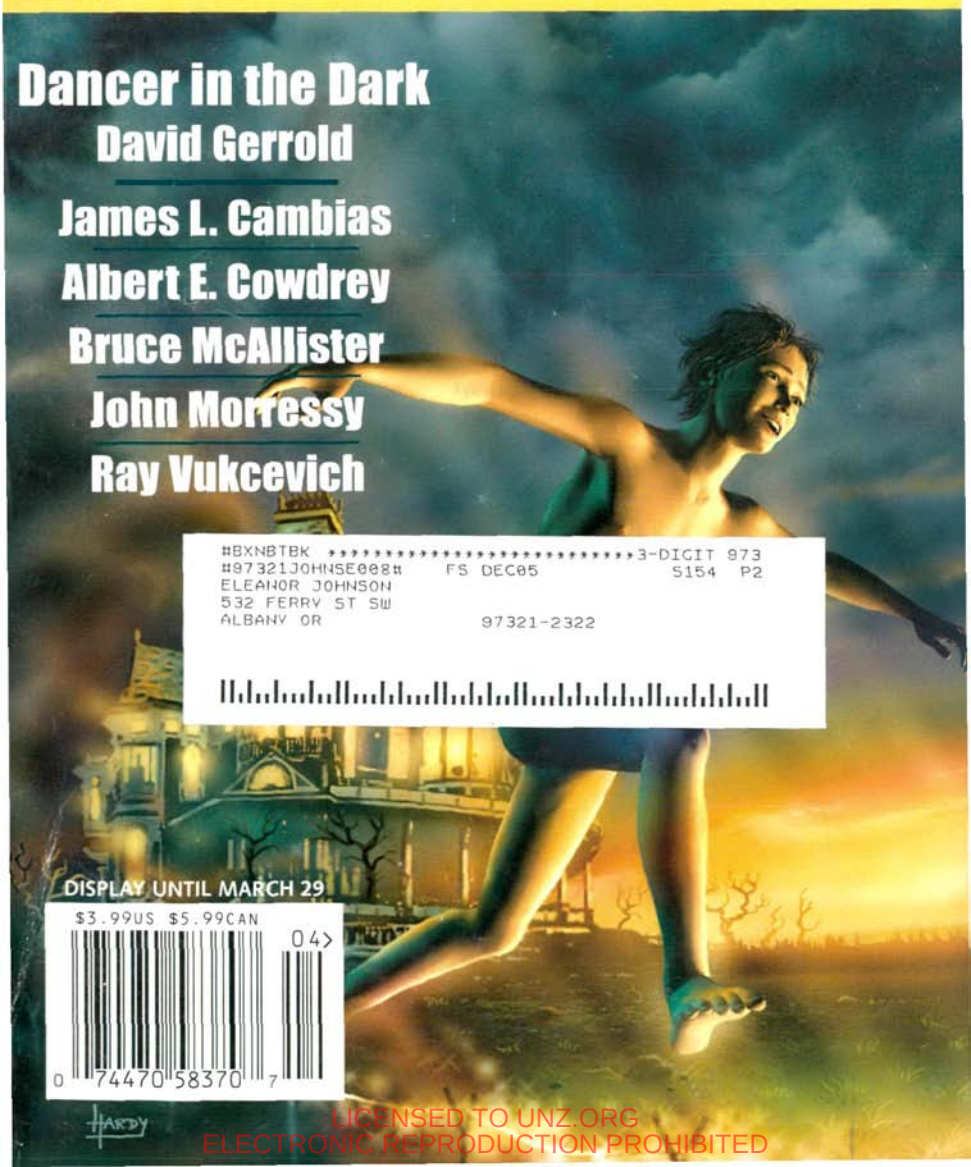

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NOVELETS

THE OCEAN OF THE BLIND 7 James L. Cambias
THE UNPLEASANTNESS AT LE CHATEAU MALVEILLANT 39 John Morressy
SILENT ECHOES 90 Albert E. Cowdrey
DANCER IN THE DARK 125 David Gerrold

SHORT STORIES

THE FOREST ON THE ASTEROID 62 Robert Sheckley
THE MILLSTONE 72 Kate Mason
THE SEVENTH DAUGHTER 86 Bruce McAllister
GAS 111 Ray Vukcevich

DEPARTMENTS

BOOKS TO LOOK FOR 30 Charles de Lint
BOOKS 34 James Sallis
PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS: ON THE INTERNET, NOBODY KNOWS YOU'RE ADORABLE 81 Paul Di Filippo
COMING ATTRACTIONS 110
FILMS: RETURN OF THE KING 120 Lucius Shepard
CURIOSITIES 162 John Kessel

CARTOONS: Joseph Farris (29), S. Harris (80), Mark Heath (85), Danny Shanahan (89).
COVER BY DAVID A. HARDY FOR "DANCER IN THE DARK"

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Jim Cambias's previous contributions include "The Alien Abduction" (Sept. 2000) and "Train of Events" (Jan. 2003). His stories tend to be marked by a vivid imagination and a good understanding of how scientists today really work. His latest story fits that mold—it's a clear-eyed depiction of scientists dealing with alien life. This story is part of a novel-in-progress, which bodes well for those of us who are interested in seeing more of these aliens.

The Ocean of the Blind

By James L. Cambias

BY THE END OF HIS SECOND month at Hitode Station, Rob Freeman had already come up with eighty-five ways to murder Henri Kerlerec. That put him third in the station's rankings — Josef Palashnik was first with one hundred forty-three, followed by Nadia Kyle with ninety-seven. In general, the number and sheer viciousness of the suggested methods was in proportion to the amount of time each spent with Henri.

Josef, as the primary submarine pilot, had to spend upward of thirty hours each week in close quarters with Henri, so his list concentrated on swift and brutal techniques suitable for a small cockpit. Nadia shared lab space with Henri — which in practice meant she did her dissections in the kitchen or on the floor of her bedroom — and her techniques were mostly obscure poisons and subtle deathtraps.

Rob's specialty was underwater photography and drone operation. All through training he had been led to expect he would be filming the exotic life forms of Ilmatar, exploring the unique environment of the remote icy world and helping the science team understand the alien biology and

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ecology. Within a week of arrival he found himself somehow locked into the role of Henri Kerlerec's personal cameraman, gofer, and captive audience. His list of murder methods began with "strangling HK with that stupid ankh necklace" and progressed through cutting the air hose on Henri's drysuit, jamming him into a thermal vent, abandoning him in midocean with no inertial compass, and feeding him to an *Aenocampus*. Some of the others on the station who routinely read the hidden "Death To HK" board had protested that last one as being too cruel to the *Aenocampus*.

Rob's first exposure to killing Henri came at a party given by Nadia and her husband Pierre Adler in their room, just after the support vehicle left orbit for the six-month voyage back to Earth. With four guests there was barely enough room, and to avoid overloading the ventilators they had to leave the door open. For refreshment they served melons from the hydroponic garden filled with some of Palashnik's home-brew potato vodka. One drank melon-flavored vodka until the hollow interior was empty, then cut vodka-flavored melon slices.

"I've got a new one," said Nadia after her third melon slice. "Put a piece of paper next to Le Nuke for a few months until it's radioactive, then write him a fan letter and slip it under his door. He'd keep the letter for his collection and die of gradual exposure."

"Too long," said Josef. "Even if he kept it in his pocket it would take years to kill him."

"But you'd have the fun of watching him lose his hair," said Nadia.

"I would rather just lock him in the reactor shed and leave him there," said Josef.

"Who are they talking about?" Rob asked.

"Henri Kerlerec," whispered the person squeezed onto the bed next to him.

"Irradiate his hair gel," said Pierre. "That way he'd put more on every day and it would be right next to his brain."

"Ha! That part has been dead for years!"

"Replace the argon in his breathing unit with chlorine," said someone Rob couldn't see, and then the room went quiet.

Henri was standing in the doorway. As usual, he was grinning. "Planning to murder somebody? Our esteemed station director, I hope."

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He glanced behind him to make sure Dr. Sen wasn't in earshot. "I have thought of an infallible technique: I would strike him over the head with a large ham or gigot or something of that kind, and then when the police come, I would serve it to them to destroy the evidence. They would never suspect!"

"Roald Dahl," murmured Nadia. "And it was a *frozen* leg of lamb."

Henri didn't hear her. "You see the beauty of it? The police eat the murder weapon. Perhaps I shall write a detective novel about it when I get back to Earth. Well, goodnight everyone!" He gave a little wave and went off toward Hab Three.

This particular morning Rob was trying to think of an especially sadistic fate for Henri. Kerlerec had awakened him at 0500 — three hours early! — and summoned him to the dive room with a great show of secrecy.

The dive room occupied the bottom of Hab One. It was a big circular room with suits and breathing gear stowed on the walls, benches for getting into one's gear, and a moon pool in the center where the Terran explorers could pass into Ilmatar's dark ocean. It was usually the coldest room in the entire station, chilled by the subzero seawater.

Henri was there, waiting at the base of the access ladder. As soon as Rob climbed down he slammed the hatch shut. "Now we can talk privately together. I have an important job for you."

"What?"

"Tonight at 0100 we are going out on a dive. Tell nobody. Do not write anything in the dive log."

"What? Why tonight? And why did you have to get me up at five in the goddamned morning to have this conversation?"

"It must be kept absolutely secret."

"Henri, I'm not doing anything until you tell me exactly what is going on. Enough cloak and dagger stuff."

"Come and see." Henri led him to the hatch into Hab Three, opened it a crack to peek through, then gestured for Rob to follow as he led the way to the lab space he shared with Nadia Kyle. It was a little room about twice the size of a sleeping cabin, littered with native artifacts, unlabeled disks, and tanks holding live specimens. Standing in the middle was a large gray plastic container as tall as a man. It was covered with stenciled markings in Cyrillic and a sky blue UNICA shipping label.

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Henri touched his thumb to a lock pad and the door swung open to reveal a bulky diving suit. It was entirely black, even the faceplate, and had a sleek, seamless look.

"Nice suit. What's so secret about it?"

"This is not a common sort of diving suit," said Henri. "I arranged specially for it to be sent to me. Nobody else has anything like it. It is a Russian Navy stealth suit, for deactivating underwater smart mines or sonar pods. The surface is completely anechoic. Invisible to any kind of sonar imaging. Even the fins are low-noise."

"How does it work?" Rob's inner geek prompted him to ask.

Henri gave a shrug. "That is for technical people to worry about. All I care is that it does work. It must — it cost me six million Euros to get it here."

"Okay, so you've got the coolest diving suit on Ilmatar. Why are you keeping it locked up? I'm sure the bio people would love to be able to get close to native life without being heard."

"Pah. When I am done they can watch all the shrimps and worms they wish to. But first, I am going to use this suit to observe the Ilmatarans up close. Imagine it, Robert! I can swim among their houses, perhaps even go right inside! Stand close enough to touch them! They will never notice I am there!"

"What about the contact rules?" The most frustrating part of the whole Ilmatar project was the ban on contacting the sentient natives of the planet. The UN committee in charge kept insisting more study was needed. Rob suspected maybe the UN was trying to appease the groups back on Earth that wanted to close down Hitode Station and pull back from Ilmatar.

"Contact? What contact? Didn't you hear — the Ilmatarans will not notice me! I will stand among them, filming at close range, but with this suit I will be invisible to them!"

"Doctor Sen's going to shit a brick when he finds out."

"By the time he finds out it will be done. What can he do to me? Send me home? I will go back to Earth on the next ship in triumph!"

"The space agencies aren't going to like it either."

"Robert, before I left Earth I did some checking. Do you know how many people regularly access space agency sites or subscribe to their news

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feeds? About fifty million people, worldwide. Do you know how many people watched the film of my Titan expedition? Ninety-six million! I have twice as many viewers, and that makes me twice as important. The agencies all love me."

Rob suspected Henri's numbers were made up on the spur of the moment, the way most of his numbers were, but it was probably true enough that Henri Kerlerec, the famous scientist-explorer and shameless media whore, got more eyeballs than the rest of the entire interstellar program.

He could feel himself being sucked into the mighty whirlpool of Henri's ego, and tried to struggle against it. "I don't want to get in any trouble."

"You have nothing to worry about. Now, listen: here is what we will do. You come down here quietly at about 0030 and get everything ready. Bring the cameras and two of the quiet impeller units. Also a drone or two. I will get this suit on myself in here, and then at 0100 we go out. With the impellers we can get as far as the Maury 3 vent. There is a little Ilmataran settlement there."

"That's a long way to go by impeller. Maury 3's what, sixty kilometers from here?"

"Three hours out, three hours back, and perhaps two hours at the site. We will get back at about 0900, while the others are still eating breakfast. They may not even notice we have gone."

"And if they do?"

"Then we just say we have been doing some filming around the habitat outside." Henri began locking up the stealth suit's container. "I tell you, they will never suspect a thing. Leave all the talking to me. Now: not another word! We have too much to do! I am going to sleep this afternoon to be fresh for our dive tonight. You must do the same. And do not speak of this to anyone!"

Broadtail is nervous. He cannot pay attention to the speaker, and constantly checks the reel holding his text. He is to speak next, his first address to the Bitterwater Company of Scholars. It is an audition of sorts —Broadtail hopes the members find his work interesting enough to invite him to join them.

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Smoothshell 24 Midden finishes her address on high-altitude creatures and takes a few questions from the audience. They aren't easy questions, either, and Broadtail worries about making a fool of himself before all these respected scholars. When she finishes, Longpincer 16 Bitterwater clacks his pincers for quiet.

"Welcome now to Broadtail 38 Sandyslope, who comes to us from a great distance to speak about ancient languages. Broadtail?"

Broadtail nearly drops his reel, but catches it in time and scuttles to the end of the room. It is a wonderful chamber for speaking, with a sloped floor so that everyone can hear directly, and walls of quiet pumice stone. He finds the end of his reel and begins, running it carefully between his feeding-tendrils as he speaks aloud. His tendrils feel the knots in the string as it passes by them. The patterns of knots indicate numbers, and the numbers match words. He remembers being careful to space his knots and tie them tightly, as this copy is for the Bitterwater library. The reel is a single unbroken cord, expensive to buy and horribly complicated to work with — very different from the original draft, a tangle of short notes tied together all anyhow.

Once he begins, Broadtail's fear dissipates. His own fascination with his topic asserts itself, and he feels himself speeding up as his excitement grows. When he pauses, he can hear his audience rustling and scrabbling, and he supposes that is a good sign. At least they aren't all going torpid.

The anchor of his speech is the description of the echo-carvings from the ruined city near his home vent of Continuous Abundance. By correlating the images of the echo-carvings with the number markings below them, Broadtail believes he can create a lexicon for the ancient city builders. He reads the Company some of his translations of other markings in the ruins.

Upon finishing, he faces a torrent of questions. Huge old Roundhead 19 Downcurrent has several tough ones — he is generally recognized as the expert on ancient cities and their builders, and he means to make sure some provincial upstart doesn't encroach on his territory.

Roundhead and some others quickly home in on the weak parts of Broadtail's argument. A couple of them make reference to the writings of the dead scholar Thickfeelers 19 Swiftcurrent, and Broadtail feels a pang

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of jealousy because he can't afford to buy copies of such rare works. As the questions continue, Broadtail feels himself getting angry in defense of his work, and struggles to retain his temper. The presentation may be a disaster, but he must remain polite.

At last it is over, and he rolls up his reel and heads for a seat at the rear of the room. He'd like to keep going, just slink outside and swim for home, but it would be rude.

A scholar Broadtail doesn't recognize scuttles to the lectern and begins struggling with a tangled reel. Longpincer sits next to Broadtail and speaks privately with shell-taps. "That was very well done. I think you describe some extremely important discoveries."

"You do? I was just thinking of using the reel to mend nets."

"Because of all the questions? Don't worry. That's a good sign. If the hearers ask questions it means they're thinking, and that's the whole purpose of this Company. I don't see any reason not to make you a member. I'm sure the others agree."

All kinds of emotions flood through Broadtail — relief, excitement, and sheer happiness. He can barely keep from speaking aloud. His shell-taps are rapid. "I'm very grateful. I plan to revise the reel to address some of Roundhead's questions."

"Of course. I imagine some of the others want copies, too. Ah, he's starting."

The scholar at the lectern begins to read a reel about a new system for measuring the heat of springs, but Broadtail is too happy to pay much attention.

AT MIDNIGHT, Rob was lying on his bunk trying to come up with some excuse not to go with Henri. Say he was sick, maybe? The trouble was that he was a rotten liar. He tried to make himself feel sick — maybe an upset stomach from ingesting seawater? His body unhelpfully continued to feel okay.

Maybe he just wouldn't go. Stay in bed and lock the door. Henri could hardly complain to Dr. Sen about him not going on an unauthorized dive. But Henri could and undoubtedly would make his life miserable with nagging and blustering until he finally gave in.

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And of course the truth was that Rob did want to go. He really wanted to be the one in the stealth suit, getting within arm's reach of the Ilmatarans and filming them up close, instead of getting a few murky long-distance drone pictures. Probably everyone else at Hitode Station felt the same way. Putting them here, actually on the sea bottom of Ilmatar, yet forbidding them to get close to the natives, was like telling a pack of horny teenagers they could get naked in bed together, but not touch.

He checked his watch. It was 0020. He got up and slung his camera bag over his shoulder. Damn Henri anyway.

Rob made it to the dive room without encountering anyone. The station wasn't like a space vehicle with round-the-clock shifts. Everyone slept from about 2400 to 0800, and only one poor soul had to stay in the control room in case of emergency. Tonight it was Dickie Graves on duty, and Rob suspected that Henri had managed to square him somehow so that the exterior hydrophones wouldn't pick up their little jaunt.

He took one of the drones off the rack and ran a quick check. It was a flexible robot fish about a meter long, more Navy surplus — American, this time. It wasn't especially stealthy, but instead was designed to mimic a mackerel's sonar signature. Presumably the Ilmatarans would figure it was some native organism and ignore it. His computer linked up with the drone brain by laser. All powered up and ready to go. He told it to hold position and await further instructions, then dropped it into the water. Just to be on the safe side, Rob fired up a second drone and tossed it into the moon pool.

Next the impellers. They were simple enough — a motor, a battery, and a pair of counter-rotating propellors. You controlled your speed with a thumb switch on the handle. They were supposedly quiet, though in Rob's experience they weren't any more stealthy than the ones you could rent at any dive shop back on Earth. Some contractor in Japan had made a bundle on them. Rob found two with full batteries and hooked them on the edge of the pool for easy access.

Now for the hard part: suiting up without any help. Rob took off his frayed and slightly smelly insulated jumpsuit and stripped to the skin. First the diaper — he and Henri were going to be out for eight hours, and getting the inside of his suit wet would invite death from hypothermia. Then a set of thick fleece longjohns, like a child's pajamas. The water

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outside was well below freezing; only the pressure and salinity kept it liquid. He'd need all the insulation he could get.

Then the drysuit, double-layered and also insulated. In the chilly air of the changing room he was getting red-faced and hot with all this protection on. The hood was next, a snug fleece balaclava with built-in earphones. Then the helmet, a plastic fishbowl more like a space helmet than most diving gear, which zipped onto the suit to make a watertight seal. The back of the helmet was packed with electronics — biomonitors, microphones, sonar unit, and an elaborate heads-up display which could project text and data on the inside of the faceplate. There was also a freshwater tube, from which he sipped before going on to the next stage.

Panting with the exertion, Rob struggled into the heavy APOS backpack, carefully started it up *before* attaching the hoses to his helmet, and took a few breaths to make sure it was really working. The APOS gear made the whole Ilmatar expedition possible. It made oxygen out of seawater by electrolysis, supplying it at ambient pressure. Little sensors and a sophisticated computer adjusted the supply to the wearer's demand. The oxygen mixed with a closed-loop argon supply; at the colossal pressures of Ilmatar's ocean bottom, the proper air mix was about 1,000 parts argon to 1 part oxygen. Hitode Station and the subs each had bigger versions, which was how humans could live under six kilometers of water and ice.

The price, of course, was that it took six days to go up to the surface. The pressure difference between the 300 atmospheres at the bottom of the sea and the half standard at the surface station meant a human wouldn't just get the bends if he went up quickly — he'd literally explode. There were other dangers, too. All the crew at Hitode took a regimen of drugs to ward off the scary side effects of high pressure.

With his APOS running (though for now its little computer was sensible enough to simply feed him air from the room outside), Rob pulled on his three layers of gloves, buckled on his fins, put on his weight belt, switched on his shoulder lamp, and then crouched on the edge of the moon pool to let himself tumble backward into the water. It felt pleasantly cool, rather than lethally cold, and he bled a little extra gas into his suit to keep him afloat until Henri could join him.

He gave the drones instructions to follow at a distance of four meters,

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and created a little window on his faceplate to let him watch through their eyes. He checked over the camera clamped to his shoulder to make sure it was working. Everything nominal. It was 0120 now. Where was Henri?

Kerlerec lumbered into view ten minutes later. In the bulky stealth suit he looked like a big black toad. The foam cover of his faceplate was hanging down over his chest, and Rob could see that he was red and sweating. Henri waddled to the edge of the pool and fell back into the water with an enormous splash. After a moment he bobbed up next to Rob.

"God, it is hot in this thing. You would not believe how hot it is. For once I am glad to be in the water. Do you have everything?"

"Yep. So how are you going to use the camera in that thing? Won't it spoil the whole stealth effect?"

"I will not use the big camera. That is for you to take pictures of me at long range. I have a couple of little cameras inside my helmet. One points forward to see what I see, the other is for my face. Link up."

They got the laser link established and Rob opened two new windows at the bottom of his faceplate. One showed him as Henri saw him — a pale, stubbly face inside a bubble helmet — and the other showed Henri in extreme close-up. The huge green-lit face beaded with sweat looked a bit like the Great and Powerful Oz after a three-day drunk.

"Now we will get away from the station and try out your sonar on my suit. You will not be able to detect me at all."

Personally Rob doubted it. Some Russian had made a cool couple of million Euros selling Henri and his sponsors at ScienceMonde a failed prototype or just a fake.

The two of them descended until they were underneath Hab One, only a couple of meters above the seafloor. The light shining down from the moon pool made a pale cone in the silty water, with solid blackness beyond.

Henri led the way away from the station, swimming with his headlamp and his safety strobe on until they were a few hundred meters out. "This is good," he said. "Start recording."

Rob got the camera locked in on Henri's image. "You're on."

Henri's voice instantly became the calm, friendly but all-knowing voice of Henri Kerlerec, scientific media star. "I am here in the dark ocean of Ilmatar, preparing to test the high-tech stealth diving suit which will

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enable me to get close to the Ilmatarans without being detected. I am covering up the faceplate with the special stealth coating now. My cameraman will try to locate me by sonar. Because the Ilmatarans live in a completely dark environment, they are entirely blind to visible light, so I will leave my safety strobe and headlamp on."

Rob opened up a window to display sonar images and began recording. First on passive — his computer could build up a vague image of the surroundings just from ambient noise and interference patterns. No sign of Henri, even though Rob could see his bobbing headlamp as he swam back and forth ten meters away.

Not bad, Rob had to admit. Those Russians know a few things about sonar baffling. He tried the active sonar. The seabottom and the rocks flickered into clear relief, an eerie false-color landscape where green meant soft and yellow meant hard surfaces. The ocean itself was completely black on active. Henri was a green-black shadow against a black background. Even with the computer synthesizing both the active and passive signals, he was almost impossible to see.

"Wonderful!" said Henri when Rob sent him the images. "I told you: completely invisible! We will edit this part down, of course — just the sonar images with me explaining it in voiceover. Now come along. We have a long trip ahead of us."

THE BITTERWATER COMPANY are waking up. Longpincer's servants scuttle along the halls of his house, listening carefully at the entrance to each guest chamber and informing the ones already awake that a meal is ready in the main hall.

Broadtail savors the elegance of having someone to come wake him when the food is ready. At his own house, all would starve if he waited for his apprentices to prepare the meals. He wonders briefly how they are getting along without him. The three of them are reasonably competent, and can certainly tend his pipes and crops without him. Broadtail does worry about how well they can handle an emergency — what if a pipe breaks or one of his nets is snagged? He imagines returning home to find chaos and ruin.

But it is so very nice here at Longpincer's house. Mansion, really. The

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Bitterwater vent isn't nearly as large as Continuous Abundance or the other town vents, but Longpincer controls the entire flow. Everything for ten cables in any direction belongs to him. He has a staff of servants and hired workers. Even his apprentices scarcely need to lift a pincer themselves.

Broadtail doesn't want to miss the meal. Longpincer's larder is as opulent as everything else at Bitterwater. As he crawls to the main hall he marvels again at the thick growths on the walls and floor. Some of his own farm pipes don't support this much life. Is it just that Longpincer's large household generates enough waste to support lush indoor growth? Or is he rich enough to pipe some excess vent water through the house itself? Either way it's far more than Broadtail's chilly property and tepid flow rights can achieve.

As he approaches the main hall Broadtail can taste a tremendous and varied feast laid out. It sounds as if half a dozen of the Company are already there; it says much for Longpincer's kitchen that the only sounds Broadtail can hear are those of eating.

He finds a place between Smoothshell and a quiet individual whose name Broadtail can't recall. He runs his feelers over the food before him and feels more admiration mixed with jealousy for Longpincer. There are cakes of pressed sourleaf, whole towfin eggs, fresh jellyfronds, and some little bottom-crawling creatures Broadtail isn't familiar with, neatly impaled on thorns and still wiggling.

Broadtail can't recall having a feast like this since he inherited the Northslope property and gave the funeral banquet for old Flatbody. He is just reaching for a third jellyfrond when Longpincer clicks loudly for attention from the end of the hall.

"I suggest a small excursion for the Company," he says. "About ten cables beyond my boundary stones upcurrent is a small vent, too tepid and bitter to be worth piping. I forbid my workers to drag nets there, and I recall finding several interesting creatures feeding at the vent. I propose swimming there to look for specimens."

"May I suggest applying Sharpfrill's technique for temperature measurement to those waters?" says Smoothshell.

"Excellent idea!" cries Longpincer. Sharpfrill mutters something about not having his proper equipment, but the others bring him around.

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They all finish eating (Broadtail notices several of the company stowing delicacies in pouches, and grabs the last towfin egg to fill his own), and set out for the edge of Longpincer's property.

Swimming is quicker than walking, so the party of scholars cruise at just above net height. At that height Broadtail can only get a general impression of the land below, but it all seems neat and orderly — a well-planned network of stone pipes radiating out from the main vent, carrying the hot, nutrient-rich water to nourish thousands of plants and bacteria colonies. Leaks from the pipes and the waste from the crops and Longpincer's household feeds clouds of tiny swimmers, which in turn attract larger creatures from the cold waters around. Broadtail notes with approval the placement of Longpincer's nets, in staggered rows along the prevailing current. With a little envy he estimates that Longpincer's nets probably produce as much wealth as his own entire property.

Beyond the boundary stones the scholars instinctively gather into a more compact group. There is less conversation and more careful listening and pinging. Longpincer assures them that he allows no bandits or scavengers around his vent, but even he pings behind them once or twice, just to make sure. But all anyone can hear are a few wild children, who flee quickly at the approach of adults.

HENRI AND RON didn't talk much on the way to the vent community. Both of them were paying close attention to the navigation displays inside their helmets. Getting around on Ilmatar was deceptively easy: take a bearing by inertial compass, point the impeller in the right direction, and off you go. But occasionally Ron found himself thinking about just how hard it would be to navigate without electronic help. The stars were hidden by a kilometer of ice overhead, and Ilmatar had no magnetic field worth speaking of. It was barely possible to tell up from down — if you had your searchlights on and could see the bottom and weren't enveloped in a cloud of silt — but maintaining a constant depth depended entirely on watching the sonar display and the pressure gauge. A human without navigation equipment on Ilmatar would be blind, deaf, and completely lost.

At 0500 they were nearing the site. "Passive sonar only," said Henri.

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"And we must be as quiet as possible. Can you film from a hundred meters away?"

"It'll need enhancement and cleaning up afterward, but yes."

"Good. You take up a position there — " Henri gestured vaguely into the darkness.

"Where?"

"That big clump of rocks at, let me see, bearing one hundred degrees, about fifty meters out."

"Okay."

"Stay there and do not make any noise. I will go on ahead toward the vent. Keep one of the drones with me."

"Right. What are you going to do?"

"I will walk right into the settlement."

Shaking his head, Rob found a relatively comfortable spot among the stones. While he waited for the silt to settle, he noticed that this wasn't a natural outcrop — these were cut stones, the remains of a structure of some kind. Some of the surfaces were even carved into patterns of lines. He made sure to take pictures of everything. The other xeno people back at Hitode would kill him if he didn't.

Henri went marching past in a cloud of silt. The big camera was going to be useless with him churning up the bottom like that, so Rob relied entirely on the drones. One followed Henri about ten meters back, the second was above him looking down. The laser link through the water was a little noisy from suspended particulates, but he didn't need a whole lot of detail. The drone cameras could store everything internally, so Rob was satisfied with just enough sight to steer them. Since he was comfortably seated and could use his hands, he called up a virtual joystick instead of relying on voice commands or the really irritating eye-tracking menu device.

"Look at that!" Henri called suddenly.

"What? Where?"

Henri's forward camera swung up to show eight Ilmatarans swimming along in formation, about ten meters up. They were all adults, wearing belts and harnesses stuffed with gear. A couple carried spears. Ever since the first drone pictures of Ilmatarans, they had been described as looking like giant lobsters, but watching them swim overhead, Rob had

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to disagree. They were more like beluga whales in armor, with their big flukes and blunt heads. Adults ranged from three to four meters long. Each had a dozen limbs folded neatly against the undersides of their shells: walking legs in back, four manipulators in front, and the big praying-mantis pincers on the front pair. They also had raspy feeding tendrils and long sensory feelers under the head. The head itself was a smooth featureless dome, flaring out over the neck like a coal-scuttle helmet — the origin of the Ilmatarans' scientific name *Salletocephalus structor.* Henri's passive microphones picked up the clicks and pops of the Ilmatarans' sonar, with an occasional loud ping like a harpsichord note.

The two humans watched as the group soared over Henri's head. "What do you think they're doing?" asked Rob when they had passed.

"I am not sure. Perhaps a hunting party. I will follow them."

Rob wanted to argue, but knew it was pointless. "Don't go too far."

Henri kicked up from the bottom and began to follow the Ilmatarans. It was hard for a human to keep up with them, even when wearing fins. Henri was sweaty and breathing hard after just a couple of minutes, but he struggled along. "They are stopping," he said after ten minutes, sounding relieved.

The Ilmatarans were dropping down to a small vent formation, which Rob's computer identified as Maury 3b. Through the drone cameras Rob watched as Henri crept closer to the Ilmatarans. At first he moved with clumsy stealth, then he abandoned all pretense and simply waded in among them. Rob waited for a reaction, but the Ilmatarans seemed intent on their own business.

A ROCK IS MISSING. Broadtail remembers a big chunk of old shells welded together by ventwater minerals and mud, just five armspans away across-current. But now it's gone. Is his memory faulty? He pings again. There it is, just where it should be. Odd. He goes back to gathering shells.

" — you hear me? Broadtail!" It is Longpincer. He appears out of nowhere just in front of Broadtail, sounding alarmed.

"I'm here. What's wrong?"

"Nothing," says Longpincer. "My own mistake."

"Wait. Tell me."

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"It's very odd. I remember hearing you clattering over the rocks, then silence. I recall pinging and sensing nothing."

"I remember a similar experience — a rock seeming to disappear and then appear again."

Smoothshell comes up. "What's the problem?" After they explain she asks, "Could there be a reflective layer here? Cold water meeting hot does that."

"I don't feel any change in the water temperature," says Longpincer. "The current here is strong enough to keep everything mixed."

"Let's listen," says Broadtail. The three of them stand silently, tails together, heads outward. Broadtail relaxes, letting the sounds and interference patterns of his surroundings create a model in his mind. The vent is there, rumbling and hissing. Someone is scrabbling up the side — probably Sharpfrill with his jars of temperature-sensitive plants. Roundhead and the quiet person are talking together half a cable away, or rather Roundhead is talking and his companion is making occasional polite clicks. Two others are swishing nets through the water upcurrent.

But there is something else. Something moving nearby. He can't quite hear it, but it blocks other sounds and changes the interference patterns. He reaches over to Smoothshell and taps on her leg. "There is a strange effect in the water in front of me, moving slowly from left to right."

She turns and listens that way while Broadtail taps the same message on Longpincer's shell. "I think I hear what you mean," she says. "It's like a big lump of very soft mud, or pumice stone."

"Yes," Broadtail agrees. "Except that it's moving. I'm going to ping it now." He tenses his resonator muscle and pings as hard as he can, loud enough to stun a few small swimmers near his head. All the other Company members about the vent stop what they are doing.

He hears the entire landscape in front of him — quiet mud, sharp echoes from rocks, muffled and chaotic patterns from patches of plants. And right in the center, only a few armspans in front of him, is a hole in the water. It's big, whatever it is: almost the size of a young adult, standing upright like a boundary marker.

Henri was completely gonzo. He was rattling off narration for the audience completely off the top of his head. Occasionally he would forget

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to use his media star voice and give way to an outburst of pure cackling glee. Rob was pretty excited, too, watching through the cameras as Henri got within arm's reach of the Ilmatarans.

"Here we see a group of Ilmatarans gathering food around one of the seabottom vents. Some are using hand-made nets to catch fish, while these three close to me appear to be scraping algae off the rocks."

"Henri, you're using Earth life names again. Those aren't fish, or algae either."

"Never mind that now. I will dub in the proper words later if I must. The audience will understand better if I use words they understand. This is wonderful, don't you think? I can pat them on the backs if I want to!"

"Remember, no contact."

"Yes, yes." Back into his narrator voice. "The exact nature of Ilmataran social organization is still not well understood. We know they live in communities of up to a hundred individuals, sharing the work of food production, craft work, and defense. The harvest these bring back to their community will be divided among all."

"Henri, you can't just make stuff up like that. Some of the audience are going to want links to more info about Ilmataran society. We don't know how they allocate resources."

"Then there is nothing to say that this is untrue. Robert, people do not want to hear that aliens are just like us. They want wise angels and noble savages. Besides, I am certain I am right. The Ilmatarans behave exactly like early human societies. Remember I am an archaeologist by training. I recognize the signs." He shifted back into media mode. "Life is difficult in these icy seas. The Ilmatarans must make use of every available source of food to ward off starvation. I am going to get closer to these individuals so that we can watch them at their work."

"Don't get too close. They might be able to smell you or something."

"I am being careful. How is the picture quality?"

"Well, the water's pretty cloudy. I've got the drone providing an overhead view of you, but the helmet camera's the only thing giving us any detail."

"I will bend down to get a better view, then. How is that?"

"Better. This is great stuff." Rob checked the drone image. "Uh, Henri, why are they all facing toward you?"

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* * *

"We must capture it," says Longpincer. "I don't remember reading about anything like this."

"How to capture something we can barely make out?" asks Broadtail.

"Surround it," suggests Smoothshell. She calls to the others. "Here, quickly! Form a circle!"

With a lot of clicking questions the other members of the Bitterwater Company gather around — except for Sharpfrill, who is far too absorbed in placing his little colonies of temperature indicators on the vent.

"Keep pinging steadily," says Longpincer. "As hard as you can. Who has a net?"

"Here!" says Raggedclaw.

"Good. Can you make it out? Get the net on it!"

The thing starts to swim upward clumsily, churning up lots of sediment and making a faint but audible swishing noise with its tails. Under Longpincer's direction the Company form a box around it, like soldiers escorting a convoy. Raggedclaw gets above it with the net. There is a moment of struggling as the thing tries to dodge aside, then the scientists close in around it.

It cuts at the net with a sharp claw, and kicks with its limbs. Broadtail feels the claw grate along his shell. Longpincer and Roundhead move in with ropes, and soon the thing's limbs are pinned. It sinks to the bottom.

"I suggest we take it to my laboratory," says Longpincer. "I am sure we all wish to study this remarkable creature."

It continues to struggle, but the netting and ropes are strong enough to hold it. Whatever it is, it's too heavy to carry swimming, so the group must walk along the bottom with their catch while Longpincer swims ahead to fetch servants with a litter to help. They all ping about them constantly, fearful that more of the strange silent creatures are lurking about.

"Robert! In the name of God, help me!" The laser link was full of static and skips, what with all the interference from nets, Ilmatarans, and sediment. The video image of Henri degenerated into a series of still shots illustrating panic, terror, and desperation.

"Don't worry!" he called back, although he had no idea what to do.

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How could he rescue Henri without revealing himself and blowing all the contact protocols to hell? For that matter, even if he did reveal himself, how could he overcome half a dozen full-grown Ilmatarans?

"Ah, bon Dieu!" Henri started what sounded like praying in French. Rob muted the audio to give himself a chance to think, and because it didn't seem right to listen in.

He tried to list his options. Call for help? Too far from the station, and it would take an hour or more for a sub to arrive. Go charging in to the rescue? Rob really didn't want to do that, and not just because it was against the contact regs. On the other hand he didn't like to think of himself as a coward, either. Skip that one and come back to it.

Create a distraction? That might work. He could fire up the hydrophone and make a lot of noise, maybe use the drones as decoys. The Ilmatarans might drop Henri to go investigate, or run away in terror. Worth a shot, anyway.

He sent the two drones in at top speed, and searched through his computer's sound library for something suitable to broadcast. "Ride of the Valkyries"? Tarzan yells? "O Fortuna"? No time to be clever; he selected the first item in the playlist and started blasting Billie Holiday as loud as the drone speakers could go. Rob left his camera gear with Henri's impeller, and used his own to get a little closer to the group of Ilmatarans carrying Henri.

BROADTAIL HEARS the weird sounds first, and alerts the others. The noise is coming from a pair of swimming creatures he doesn't recognize, approaching fast from the left. The sounds are unlike anything he remembers — a mix of low tones, whistles, rattles, and buzzes. There is an underlying rhythm, and Broadtail is sure this is some kind of animal call, not just noise.

The swimmers swoop past low overhead, then, amazingly, circle around together for another pass, like trained performing animals. "Do those creatures belong to Longpincer?" Broadtail asks the others.

"I don't think so," says Smoothshell. "I don't remember seeing them in his house."

"Does anyone have a net?"

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"Don't be greedy," says Roundhead. "This is a valuable specimen. We shouldn't risk it to chase after others."

Broadtail starts to object, but he realizes Roundhead is right. This thing is obviously more important. Still — "I suggest we return here to search for them after sleeping."

"Agreed."

The swimmers continue diving at them and making noise until Longpincer's servants show up to help carry the specimen.

Rob had hoped the Ilmatarans would scatter in terror when he sent in the drones, but they barely even noticed them — even with the speaker volume maxed out. He couldn't tell if they were too dumb to pay attention, or smart enough to focus on one thing at a time.

He gunned the impeller, closing in on the little group. Enough subtlety. He could see the lights on Henri's suit about fifty meters away, bobbing and wiggling as the Ilmatarans carried him. Rob slowed to a stop about ten meters from the Ilmatarans. The two big floodlights on the impeller showed them clearly.

Enough subtlety and sneaking around. He turned on his suit hydrophone. "Hey!" He had his dive knife in his right hand in case of trouble.

Broadtail is relieved to be rid of the strange beast. He is getting tired and hungry, and wants nothing more than to be back at Longpincer's house snacking on threadfin paste and heat-cured eggs.

Then he hears a new noise. A whine, accompanied by the burble of turbulent water. Off to the left about three lengths there is some large swimmer. It gives a loud call. The captive creature struggles harder.

Broadtail pings the new arrival. It is very odd indeed. It has a hard cylindrical body like a riftcruiser, but at the back it branches out into a bunch of jointed limbs covered with soft skin. The thing gives another cry and waves a couple of limbs.

Broadtail moves toward it, trying to figure out what it is. Two creatures, maybe? And what is it doing? Is this a territorial challenge? He keeps his own pincers folded so as not to alarm it.

"Be careful, Broadtail," Longpincer calls.

"Don't worry." He doesn't approach any closer, but evidently he's

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already too close. The thing cries out one more time, then charges him. Broadtail doesn't want the other Bitterwater scholars to see him flee, so he splays his legs and braces himself, ready to grapple with this unknown monster.

But just before it hits him, the thing veers off and disappears into the silent distance. Listening carefully lest it return, Broadtail backs toward the rest of the group and they resume their journey to Longpincer's house.

Everyone agrees that this expedition is stranger than anything they remember. Longpincer seems pleased.

Rob stopped his impeller and let the drones catch up. He couldn't think of anything else to do. The Ilmatarans wouldn't be scared off, and there was no way Rob could attack them. Whatever happened to Henri, Rob did not want to be the first human to harm an alien.

The link with Henri was still open. The video showed him looking quite calm, almost serene.

"Henri?" he said. "I tried everything I could think of. I can't get you out. There are too many of them."

"It is all right, Robert," said Henri, sounding surprisingly cheerful. "I do not think they will harm me. Otherwise why go to all the trouble to capture me alive? Listen: I think they have realized I am an intelligent being like themselves. This is our first contact with the Ilmatarans. I will be humanity's ambassador."

"You think so?" For once Rob found himself hoping Henri was right.

"I am certain of it. Keep the link open. The video will show history being made."

Rob sent in one drone to act as a relay as the Ilmatarans carried Henri into a large rambling building near the Maury 3a vent. As he disappeared inside, Henri managed a grin for the camera.

Longpincer approaches the strange creature, laid out on the floor of his study. The others are all gathered around to help and watch. Broadtail has a fresh reel of cord and is making a record of the proceeding. Longpincer begins. "The hide is thick, but flexible, and is a nearly perfect sound absorber. The loudest of pings barely produce any image at all. There are four limbs. The forward pair appear to be for feeding, while the

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rear limbs apparently function as both walking legs and what one might call a double tail for swimming. Roundhead, do you know of any such creature recorded elsewhere?"

"I certainly do not recall reading of such a thing. It seems absolutely unique."

"Please note as much, Broadtail. My first incision is along the underside. Cutting the hide releases a great many bubbles. The hide peels away very easily; there is no connective tissue at all. I feel what seems to be another layer underneath. The creature's interior is remarkably warm."

"The poor thing," says Raggedclaw. "I do hate causing it pain."

"As do we all, I'm sure," says Longpincer. "I am cutting through the under-layer. It is extremely tough and fibrous. I hear more bubbles. The warmth is extraordinary — like pipe-water a cable or so from the vent."

"How can it survive such heat?" asks Roundhead.

"Can you taste any blood, Longpincer?" adds Sharpfrill.

"No blood that I can taste. Some odd flavors in the water, but I judge that to be from the tissues and space between. I am peeling back the under-layer now. Amazing! Yet another layer beneath it. This one has a very different texture — fleshy rather than fibrous. It is very warm. I can feel a trembling sensation and spasmodic movements."

"Does anyone remember hearing sounds like that before?" says Smoothshell. "It sounds like no creature I know of."

"I recall that other thing making similar sounds," says Broadtail.

"I now cut through this layer. Ah — now we come to viscera. The blood tastes very odd. Come, everyone, and feel how hot this thing is. And feel this! Some kind of rigid structures within the flesh."

"It is not moving," says Roundhead.

"Now let us examine the head. Someone help me pull off the shell here. Just pull. Good. Thank you, Raggedclaw. What a lot of bubbles! I wonder what this structure is?"

The trip back was awful. Rob couldn't keep from replaying Henri's death in his mind. He got back to the station hours late, exhausted and half out of his mind. As a small mercy Rob didn't have to tell anyone what had happened — they could watch the video.

There were consequences, of course. But because the next supply

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vehicle wasn't due for another twenty months, it all happened in slow motion. Rob knew he'd be going back to Earth, and guessed that he'd never make another interstellar trip again. He didn't go out on dives; instead he took over drone maintenance and general tech work from Sergei, and stayed inside the station.

Nobody blamed him, at least not exactly. At the end of his debriefing, Dr. Sen did look at Rob over his little Gandhi glasses and say, "I think it was rather irresponsible of you both to go off like that. But I am sure you know that already."

Sen also deleted the "Death to HK" list from the station's network, but someone must have saved a copy. The next day it was anonymously relayed to Rob's computer with a final method added: "Let a group of Ilmatarans catch him and slice him up."

Rob didn't think it was funny at all.

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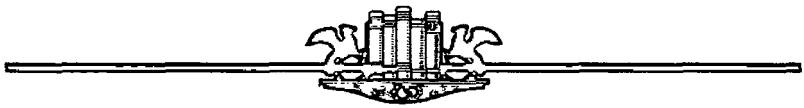

Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

lost boy lost girl, by Peter Straub, Random House, 2003, $24.95.

MAYBE I'M just an old fogey, but I sort of miss the days where it was possible to keep up with pretty much everything that was published in the field. As it stands, with the flood of new releases that fill the shelves of our bookstores, not only do I know that I'm missing out on great new writers, but I find it hard to keep up with the output of old favorites as well.

That said, I also know that I don't want to return to those days because there are *far* more wonderful books being published these days and just because I can't get to them all doesn't mean the publishing industry should streamline itself to my particular needs. I'll just have to find more reading time.

In the stacks of books that arrived in the past few weeks, I found a copy of this new novel by Peter Straub. Since I knew it would be good, I almost did what I always do with his books: stick it on a shelf and get to it when I was in the mood for something classy and engrossing. The trouble is, I almost never get to those books — or when I do, it's far too late to consider reviewing them.

But this time I opened it up before I shelved it and started to read the first few pages. A half hour later I looked up, blinking, to realize that the story didn't want to let me go.

Now this is the odd sort of occurrence that happens with Straub's books. They're literate and often move at a slower pace than a traditional thriller, but they're no less engrossing for that, and in fact, are often real page-turners in their own right.

lost boy lost girl opens with the aftermath of the death of Tim Underhill's sister-in-law. It goes on to explore ghosts, serial killers,

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obsessions with deserted houses that have an aura of evil, missing adolescents, and the nature of the soul. I'd like to give you more detail, but part of the joy of the book is uncovering the mysteries and strange occurrences along with the characters.

It's not a particularly graphic book, for all its subject matter, but it certainly deals with disturbing issues that are no less unsettling for taking place off stage. And the characters are beautifully brought to life, be it the teenagers or the adults. But what I liked best about it wasn't so much the language (which is eloquent), the story (which is gripping), or even those characters (so true to and full of life), so much as the questions Straub raises about relationships and place, how their histories connect in sometimes inexplicable but nevertheless influential ways. That, and his explorations into what it means to be human, whether we wear a cage of flesh or not.

Lyra's Oxford, by Philip Pullman, Knopf, 2003, $10.95.

Lyra's Oxford, by Philip Pullman, Knopf, 2003, $14.95 (CD.)

Here's an entertaining coda of sorts to Pullman's well-received trilogy *His Dark Materials* (reviewed in previous installments of this column). It focuses on the plucky Lyra and her demon companion Pantalaimon (who takes the shape of a pine martin), both of whom played important roles in the trilogy.

The story Pullman tells now is a smaller one, though no less engaging. Lyra and Pan come to the aid of a witch's demon searching for an alchemist living in Oxford, and as one might expect, end up in all sorts of trouble.

The small hardcover book is quite delightful, though the map of Oxford glued to one of the pages inside seems awkward and would have been better placed on one of the inside covers — or better yet, in a flap of the cover as it is in the CD package, where one can remove it and easily spread it out.

The CD features the same story as the book, read by Pullman (who has a wonderfully resonant voice), with actors delivering the dialogue of the characters. I read the book first, and certainly enjoyed it, but was utterly charmed by the CD production.

Pick this up for a young friend, but make sure you get a copy for yourself as well.

And if you just can't get enough

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of this series, Continuum recently published *His Dark Materials Trilogy* by Claire Squires as part of their reader's guide series. It's a slim volume but does a fine job of providing an author's biography, an exploration of the trilogy, and then has a look at how both fit into literature as a whole. And happily, for a scholarly work, it's all very readable.

Mr. Golightly's Holiday, by Salley Vickers, Fourth Estate, 2003, £16.99.

A word of warning: I'm going to spoil a hidden premise of this book, right from the start, so if you're already thinking of reading it and don't want to hear anything about it beforehand, please skip on to another review.

Vickers has made what some might consider a bold move by having the Christian God be her principal character. Portrayed by Vickers, Mr. Golightly is a somewhat befuddled older gentleman, on holiday from the big business he runs to rewrite his one big book, hoping to make it more relevant for a contemporary audience. And so he comes to rent Spring Cottage, in the small Devon village of Great Calne on the edge of Dartmoor.

Reading the book without the foreknowledge that Mr. Golightly is, in fact, the Almighty, will in no way spoil what is a charming and discerning character study of the inhabitants of this village. Vickers spends as much time with the entwined lives of its inhabitants as she does with Golightly as he finds himself getting caught up in the nets of their gossip and complications.

And I suppose once you've figured it out you could go back and reread it. But I preferred knowing before I started (the premise was why I picked the book up in the store in the first place) and thoroughly enjoyed knowing "the secret." It was much like a second viewing of *The Sixth Sense*, filled with so many delicious ah-ha moments, from humorous to heartbreaking to just eerie.

Vickers stays true to the Biblical interpretations of Golightly (Old and New Testaments), but also does a tremendous job of humanizing the character. I've heard that there has been some protest over the book in her native England, but those protesters are making a mistake if they want to broaden their influence. For this reader, Vickers's Golightly is a much more attractive being than the one depicted in the Big Book.

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The Life Eaters, by David Brin & Scott Hampton, Wildstorm/DC Comics, 2003, $29.95.

Building on "Thor Meets Captain America" which originally appeared in the July 1986 issue of this magazine, David Brin expands on that novella of his to present a world where...well, let me quote the dust jacket, since it does such a succinct job of summing it up:

"Roused by sorcery and a stench of holocaust, Norse gods have returned to the mortal plane, tilting the scales of World War II and cheating the Allies of victory.

"Nearly a generation later the war still rages, this time in the jungles of Southeast Asia. The tide has been set for a final battle as a few heroes gather their courage — and their most advanced technology — for a final stand against the Nazis and their Aesir partners."

The Life Eaters has all the drama, scope, and power of one of the old Norse sagas, for Brin is working on a grand scale here, juggling many balls, and not dropping any. There is thoughtful — and dark — speculation on how things might have turned out if the story's premise had actually played out, how technology we take for granted now was developed in different circumstances, how world politics would have adjusted. There's a gripping storyline, and dialogue that suits all the different voices, from the Aesir through to the nationalities of the various humans.

But most importantly, there are real characters, who develop and change, who attempt and fail and sometimes succeed in their struggles, all the while trying to understand this strange and dangerous world into which they've been thrust.

Scott Hampton displays some expected comic book art (regular panel breakdowns, outlined figures), but most of the book is painted, magnificently bringing Brin's dark visions to life.

Highly recommended for the strong of heart.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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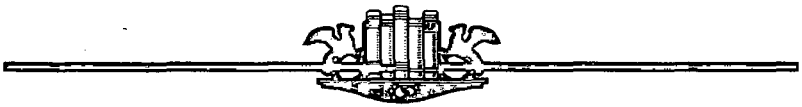

BOOKS

JAMES SALLIS

A Place So Foreign and 8 More, by Cory Doctorow, Four Walls Eight Windows, 2003, $13.95.

In for a Penny, by James P. Blaylock, Subterranean Press, 2003, $40.

YOU ARE what you eat.

Okay. Some think that's the most important thing, life's guiding principle. But you're also what you *don't* eat.

Ours is a junk culture. We quote catch phrases from ads and hit TV shows, not Montaigne or Latin proverbs. And however given we personally may be to thoughts of Joyce's nighttown sequence or an appreciation of Thomas Bernhard, nonetheless we grew up inundated by the likes of Mickey Mouse and Mickey Spillane, George Reeves's Superman, Terminator films, *Friends* — magnificent trash.

So as artists we have three choices.

Like Sixties pop painters, we can accept all this as a species of new vocabulary and embrace it in toto, uncritically, filling our work with the images — the substance and detritus — crowding about us.

We can, like many literary-quarterly writers, simply ignore it and set to work with the anticipation of rising into and existing in some higher, purer air.

Or we can choose the difficult task of trying to graft higher intentions onto that magnificent trash, the messy, confusing spore of our day.

I've long suspected that genre fiction has a unique hold on its time. For many of us, the Forties *are* Raymond Chandler, noir films, and *Casablanca*. And a book like *Fahrenheit 451*, a film like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, tells us more about the cold war, about conformism, fear, and repression, than any dozen sociological studies. Yet, while rooted securely in its time of origin, genre fiction — the mystery

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or crime novel, fantasy and science fiction, the Western — quite naturally sails (to misquote Van Morrison) into the mythic. Elements of the epic, of the Manichaen, are built into the very structure of the thing, bodies beneath the concrete.

What we're doing is twisting the world into new shapes, Rick DeMarinis says, and if we twist the world long enough and hard enough, guided by intuition, life has no choice but to surrender its truths.

One suspects that for Cory Doctorow many of those truths have to do with magnificent trash, with the signposts, landmarks, and psychic Dumpsters of our time. The first story appearing in his collection, "Craphound," is a demotic hymn to junk culture, catching just right, in its buddy tale of homeboy scavenger and alien collector, the mix of casual affection, greed, and bafflement our throwaways, the myriad ephemera of our past, can engender. In "To Market, to Market: The Rebranding of Billy Bailey," a story tracking the classic sf trope *If this goes on*, schoolchildren undergo the sort of corporate sponsorship that's now afforded sports figures and that litters our landscape with clever TV spots, fetching magazine ads, and a succession of inescapable logos resembling nothing so much as the diagram outlines of fighter planes passed out to WW2 civilian watchers.

Many of Doctorow's stories are about people pretending — even while not wishing — to be something they aren't. The young man in "A Place So Foreign" must keep secret his life as son of an ambassador to the future and all he has learned there. The golemic creatures of "Return to Pleasure Island" live among us as menials. Billy Bailey turns in an instant, exigently, from brand-name heel to media-vetted dissenter.

"Truth be told, sponsorship was lean in the sixth grade. They were nearly ready for Nintendo Middle School, where they'd be lowly seventh-graders.... The sixth-grade crop of heels was mostly doomed. Billy had gotten out while the getting was good."

Three of Doctorow's stories, set in a universe in which aliens have taken over Earth's higher affairs, deal with extravagant outsiders trying to fit in — among family and peers, into the crawlspaces and hollows of their own society, into the galactic community hovering like an oasis in their air of lost connections. One of these envisions how Superman might make out in a

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world in which his historic mission has been usurped by aliens and he now subsists on a government pension.

"It had been his idea, and he'd tossed it around with the movement people who'd planned the demo: They'd gone to an army-surplus store and purchased hundreds of decommissioned rifles, their bores filled with lead, their firing pins defanged. He'd flown above and ahead of the demonstration, in his traditional tights and cape, dragging a cargo net full of rifles from his belt. He pulled them out one at a time, and bent them into balloon-animals — fanciful giraffes, wiener-dogs, bumble-bees, poodles — and passed them out to the crowds lining Yonge Street. It had been a boffo smash hit. And it made great TV."

The nine stories of *A Place So Foreign* date in original publication from 1998 to 2002. It's a tough choice, but my personal favorite has to be "Return to Pleasure Island," conceived, Doctorow tells us in one of the illuminations that preface each story, during a trip through the Pinocchio ride in Disneyland's Fantasyland. Here he speaks of "that interstitial moment, the hot second when the world slides from fantasy to reality" and ponders what it would be like not to give it up, to live forever "in that interstitial zone...constantly traversing the equator girding the real and fantastic hemispheres?"

This is a story whose strangeness matches anything mapped out by Sturgeon, Farmer, Lafferty, or Bisson. The lead character, a golem, spins cotton candy and watches children turn into donkeys. His kind procreate by biting off their thumbs. Right-thumb offspring and left-thumb offspring are quite different, of course. And then there are tongue offspring....

We can read this story, like most in *A Place So Foreign*, again and again. However many times we read it, however adamantly we bring what critical apparatus we possess to bear upon it, it will never give up its secrets, never surrender wholly its wonder, its magic.

If ever there was a definition of literature, I submit, that's it.

Trash, as it happens, is also at the heart of several stories in James Blaylock's excellent collection *In for a Penny*, perhaps most notably in "The War of the Worlds," where an entire life, an entire relationship, and by extension an entire culture, in their apparent last moments become the things their foot soldiers choose to carry.

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"He studied a couple of the faded old record jackets, overcome by a wave of nostalgia. They were too much a part of his past, and without his past he was nothing, only a cardboard cutout living in the tiresome moment...these objects, cast away into the dark limbo of closets and garages, were *him*, in some essential way. One was defined by the stuff of one's life."

"In for a Penny" tells the story of a man who, coming upon a garage sale much like one in Doctorow's "Craphound," impulsively purchases a coin purse with the penny he finds inside it. This stroke of luck affords him a sense of entitlement; soon he is rooting about in trash heaps and Dumpsters for further treasure, glancing back fitfully at the ordinary life he's left behind.

It would be difficult to overlook that several of the stories collected here are death-ridden. In "Home Before Dark" a man must deal with his first hours in the afterlife. "His Own Back Yard" tells of another who becomes a kind of living ghost in the realm of his own childhood. In "The Trismegistus Club," forthrightly a ghost story, bibliomanic dead hover about the crowded London bookstore in which their collections are now interred.

"Small Houses" is the wonderful tale of a man facing his last hours. Since his wife's death, Johnson has moved out of the big house to inhabit the treehouse he built years ago. A fish for which he cares lovingly is his only banner of life. Like Queequeg, he has built his own coffin — an even smaller house — outfitting it with exquisitely carpentered, ultimately removable compartments so that it may be used in the interim as a toolbox.

"He had driven into Los Angeles, to a big lumberyard that sold hardwoods, where he had picked out quarter-sawn oak planks without any checking or splitting. They had cost him plenty, in time and money both. He had hand rubbed tung oil into the wood to finish it...."

This story's end marvelously represents Blaylock's evocative writing in all its physicality, leverage, and resonance — as well as the elegiac mood that may be the most striking common denominator here.

"But now he was free to go, out at last into the waning sunlight. His breath came in shallow gasps as he tottered across the yard and sat down hard in the open air among the fallen fig leaves, the evening clouds and the first stars turning far far above him in the sky, and the

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wind rustling the foliage around his small house, hidden now within that leafy darkness. The glow of the fish bowl shone as ever through the shifting foliage, casting its dim light out into the night."

Elegiac, since each story here embraces loss. Loss of past, loss of youth; fissures long open between what was, what one imagined or foresaw, and what is; broken connections between fathers and sons or husbands and wives; loss of the world itself.

In for a Penny collects seven stories, most of them originally published at *Scifi.com*, one ("The Trismegistus Club") appearing here for the first time. None are repeats from the author's prior collection *13 Phantasms* (2000). Hardcore readers might object that some of Blaylock's stories, even those that like "The War of the Worlds" blatantly employ fantastic tropes, are not science fiction or fantasy at all, but mainstream stories traveling incognito.

Sometimes we can forget that *all* fiction is fantasy: systems of metaphors, lies and sidelong glances meant to help us escape and embrace, to define and understand, our experience. At its best — and again, I submit, there is no better definition of literature — fiction breaks through the crust of dailiness. It lifts us out of the "tiresome moment," into the interstices between what seems and what is, "the hot second when the world slides from fantasy to reality."

Fine writers like Doctorow and Blaylock understand that those interstices are where we live — the only air we can breathe.

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In his last adventure, "The Game Is a Foot" (Sept. 2002), the wizard Kedrigern turned detective in order to solve a locked-room mystery. This time out, our favorite sorcerer takes on a bit more than he can handle, or so it seems....

The Unpleasantness at Le Château Malveillant

By John Morressy

"YOU MUST DO SOMETHING for the poor unfortunate man," Princess said. "You can't refuse."

"I *can* refuse. I *will* refuse. I *do* refuse," said Kedrigern, his face set like flint, his jaw firm. "Rathreen is neither poor nor unfortunate. He needs no help from me."

"His life is in danger!" Princess cried.

"The life of a king who's won his kingdom at sword's point is always in danger. It goes with the title. That's why he has an army, a palace guard, personal bodyguards, a champion, tasters for his food and wine, and a corps of spies. He wears chain mail even when he sleeps. His castle is set on the highest point of an island whose every approach is swept by treacherous currents. It's a fortress. It's impregnable, unassailable, proof against an army and a navy. Even against marines. I assure you, my dear, Rathreen is as safe as a king can be. Assassins may threaten all they like; no one can get into that castle and get close enough — "

"No large force, but one determined man can penetrate — "

Kedrigern threw up his hands. "Oh, no, not that old cliché," he

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groaned. With a dramatic flourish, he cast a furtive glance about, lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper, and said, "An army can't get through, but one brave clever man can find a way in, elude the guards, kill the king, and escape before anyone knows what's happened. Rubbish and balderdash!" he concluded in disdain.

"It happens all the time in romances."

"And justice triumphs and true love overcomes all obstacles. Why do you think they're called romances?"

Princess was not about to give in. "That's all beside the point. According to that letter he's leaving his army and his guards and the safety of his castle to go to the conference of kings of the western marches at Le Château Malveillant."

Kedrigern shook his head. "Makes no difference. His bodyguards go everywhere with him. No, my dear. At home or away, Rathreen needs no help from a wizard. In all likelihood, he needs no help from anyone. Those threats are mere noise, the work of a gasconading nonentity."

Princess looked at him in pained disbelief. "The Lord of Shadows is no nonentity. He commands a legion of assassins who obey his every command. It's common knowledge."

"Common knowledge is invariably wrong. Lord of Shadows, indeed!" Kedrigern said with a sniff of lofty disdain. "Posturing and braggadocio. You can't take seriously anyone who calls himself 'Lord of Shadows' and goes about shouting, 'I'm an assassin, fear me!' The assassins to fear are the ones who save the boasting until after they've cut your throat."

"Different assassins have different methods. The Lord of Shadows likes to advertise. Rathreen is in deadly peril unless you save him."

"I don't believe that. I think Rathreen wants us along for no reason but to grace his entourage. Kings like to display beautiful princesses and great wizards," said the wizard. Seeing her still unmoved, he retreated to his final defensive position. "Besides, it would be a terrible trip. We'd be gone for weeks. Maybe months. Miserable roads, swollen rivers...possibly a sea crossing...a drafty uncomfortable castle...cold dank sleeping chambers...incompetent kitchen staff...clumsy servants...men with drawn swords everywhere, ready to jump out of their skin at every creak of a floorboard. And all for nothing."

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Princess closed on him with the unassailable argument. "Do it for me," she said.

"Why are you so set on helping Rathreen?"

"We might be related."

"You...and Rathreen?" Kedrigern's voice was small with wonder. He pictured Rathreen, a bulging, towering, glowering warlord, all muscle and scars and steel, who had subdued a violent lawless land and made it into a slightly less violent, marginally more law-abiding kingdom. He looked at Princess, slender, beautiful, fair of face, soft of voice, tender of heart. He shook his head and weakly asked, "How?"

"Well, I can't say exactly. But I don't know all my relatives, and it's common knowledge that anyone of noble birth is probably related in some way to everyone else of noble birth."

"Common knowledge again," Kedrigern murmured.

"If you like. The mere possibility puts us under an obligation to help each other."

"You have no obligation to Rathreen. He's not of noble birth. He rose from the peasantry."

"So did you," Princess pointed out.

"I did not! I was a foundling! One of my parents was a great wizard, the other nobly born!"

"Common knowledge?" Princess asked with a sweet smile.

"No. Flawless logic."

"All the more reason to help Rathreen, then. He was probably a foundling, too. Only someone nobly born could raise himself so."

"From what I've seen of the nobly born, they do a lot more banging and bashing and besieging and invading of one another than helping out."

"No one's perfect, dear. I'll tell Spot to start packing."

The question had been resolved. Musing on the futility of even a momentary hesitation in responding to a client's appeal once Princess was aware of it, Kedrigern made his way outside to where Rathreen's messenger and guards awaited. Princess was incurably soft-hearted. An endearing quality, to be sure, but frequently unwarranted and almost always inconvenient. She believed that anyone, however villainous, self-deceived, or justly served, who sought help from Kedrigern should receive it, and receive it at once. Especially kings. And he could not find it in his heart to refuse her.

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"Tell your master we'll leave in three days," he informed the messenger. "Spot will bring you out a good meal and a barrel of ale. You can camp in the field."

"I'll have the men do so, your honor. I'll go myself at once to bring the good news to King Rathreen. He will sleep easily knowing that you have come to his aid," said the messenger, a grizzled old soldier. "I offer you his thanks."

"Tell him to thank my wife. We will proceed directly to Le Château Malveillant and meet him there. Tell him to reserve us a chamber with a view."

"I am assured that every chamber has a lovely view. And when it rains, running water."

"I look forward to the comforts of Le Château Malveillant."

"I am to give you this, your honor. It is my master's custom to pay in advance," the messenger said, drawing a fat pouch from his tunic and placing it in the wizard's hands. It clinked with a satisfying note.

"One thing more," said the wizard. "Does Rathreen know why the Lord of Shadows wants to kill him?"

"He has no idea, your honor. It is well known that the Shadow Lord accepts commissions from anyone who pays his price."

Kedrigern sighed and nodded. "Common knowledge. Of course."

While the squad of men sent to escort them made their camp, and Spot prepared a cauldron of stew for their supper, Kedrigern unrolled the message from Rathreen and read it once more. *To the great master of spells and counterspells*, it began. A decent opening. *I appeal to you in the name of our old friendship to come to my aid.* Stuff and nonsense. They had met once, many years ago, when Kedrigern removed an amateurish spell cast against Rathreen by an enemy. Once, and no more. Hardly a gremial friendship. *I badly need your help. The Lord of Shadows has sworn to have my life before the Moon is full. He will send six assassins against me. If I escape them all, he will know that my destiny is to live long, and will make no further attempt. But all the world knows that the agents of the Lord of Shadows never fail. The power of a great wizard may make the difference between life and death. You must help me.* Details of the vital importance of the forthcoming conference followed. Last of all came Rathreen's seal, deeply impressed.

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What, Kedrigern wondered, was the Lord of Shadows up to? If he wanted Rathreen dead, why didn't he just send out his assassins and get it over with? So much more efficient that way. And what was a wizard supposed to do about assassins? There was nothing magical about a knife in the ribs or poison in the wine. Kings had bodyguards trained to attend to such matters.

Could it be that the Lord of Shadows used magic to dispatch his victims? Had he a way of killing at long distances? Kedrigern frowned at the thought. If that were so, he might find himself in very deep waters. But in that case, why six assassins? Why any at all? And why stop at six? Did he want Rathreen dead, or didn't he? What kind of an assassin sets a limit on his hunting season? Mysteries within mysteries, he muttered, shaking his head.

Rathreen's note was no help at all. No useful information, no explanations, not a single illuminating detail, just "I appeal," "I need," "you must," and a curt injunction to drop everything and come running. Typical of a king.

But unlike some kings he had known, Rathreen paid generously and in advance. Kedrigern hefted the pouch in his hand. Forty crowns at the very least. And a pleasant bonus for Princess: a gathering of kings and their courtiers — even when the kings were little more than jumped-up bandit chiefs — was just the sort of vacation she enjoyed. Until they ran out of assassins, she would enjoy the pleasures of court life.

Unfortunately such pleasures came at the price of travel and long absence from the comforts of home. He entered the cottage frowning and went directly to his workroom.

Princess was already there. She had laid several books on the big table and was searching the shelves for others when he entered.

"You'll want that green one off the top shelf, won't you? I can't reach it," she said.

"I won't need that one for a while. Thank you for getting these down for me."

"I knew you'd want to look up the Lord of Shadows, and go over the books of protective spells. I want to brush up on them, too."

"Good idea," he said, squeezing her hand. "If this shadowy fellow plans to use magic, it may require both of us to handle him."

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"Do you really think so?" she said, beaming. "I'd love to have a chance to work some magic. I'm sure all those knights and courtiers and their ladies think that a princess is just a pretty face and an empty head. I'd like to show them what a princess can do when she puts her mind to it."

"It's entirely possible, my dear. In any event, it does no harm to be prepared."

They settled down in comfortable chairs before the fire in the great room, and soon no sound could be heard within but the crackling of the fire and the occasional rustle of a turning page or faint sound expressive of recognition or interest. The serenity of the room was a reassuring setting in which to acquaint himself with his adversary. Now and then a snatch of song came from the encampment in the field, and every so often an outburst of raunchy laughter, but nothing sufficiently loud to disturb the mood.

Kedrigern learned that the Lord of Shadows was a fanatic, though the focus of his fanaticism was uncertain; perhaps he was a fanatic on general principles. Over the years he had gathered a following of strong young men as fanatic as he but not as bright, and trained them in the techniques of stealth and murder. At first they simply killed those who interfered with their primary activities — theft, kidnapping, arson, false coining and such — but in time the Lord of Shadows learned that the greatest profit was to be made from taking not goods, but lives, and made his services available to those who were willing to pay his very high price. His fanaticism was apparently non-partisan and non-sectarian. Pay his price and he would kill anyone you named.

His assassins never failed, and as their reputation spread, his confidence blossomed into arrogance. He took to naming the date, and sometimes the hour, on which his victim would die. Occasionally he would describe the murder weapon. His warning to Rathreen of the number of assassins to be sent against him was a new embellishment to his style, as was the promise that if they failed, he would trouble Rathreen no further.

His identity, his origins, his appearance, and, most importantly, his whereabouts were unknown. He planned his murders with care. Only a handful of his agents had ever been taken alive, and then only after their work was done. Every one had managed to swallow poison before a word could be wrung from him.

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As was common with figures of mystery, lurid rumor and wild speculation had compensated for the absence of fact. But no one had ever attributed magic to the Lord of Shadows. Kedrigern found that reassuring, but puzzling. Rathreen was protected against every known avenue of assassination, yet he wanted the help of a wizard, a specialist in counterspells. Was he simply making assurance doubly sure, or had the warning contained more than he was letting on? Kedrigern laid the book aside and thought on the matter, and found himself waking with a start. Princess had retired hours ago. He rose with a yawn and made his way to bed. They would get their answers from Rathreen.

CLEAR SKIES, BRIGHT days, and the brilliant colors of autumn made this a fine time for traveling, and they made good initial progress along dry uncrowded roads. To Kedrigern's discomfort, the nearer they came to Le Château Malveillant, the more crowded the way became.

As they approached the outer gate of the castle, Kedrigern and Princess found themselves in a pandemonium of horses and wagons and people. All around them tumblers tumbled, musicians tootled and squeaked, and troupes of players, jugglers, wrestlers, mountebanks, pickpockets, cutpurses, prostitutes, quacksalvers, thimbleriggers, blagueurs, and the like went energetically and often noisily about their work.

"Just look at all the people!" Princess exclaimed in delight.

"Yes. Just look at them," said Kedrigern, wincing at the thought of an even greater crowd within the walls. He should have anticipated this. A gathering of kings would attract everyone for many leagues around. It would combine the most repellent features of tournament, market, and country fair. Knights would come to test their skills in the lists; fair ladies, to show favor to their champions; merchants to display their finest wares; the rest to ply their trades, honest or otherwise.

This was truly an event of some magnitude. Seven kings were assembling to discuss the unification of their lands and forces under a single high king who would lead them to an age of peace, plenty, and profit. Kedrigern had heard rumors of this plan for some time; only from his guides, Rathreen's trusted men, did he learn the details.

The scheme was much further along than he had suspected. The

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preliminary points had been settled. The main objective of this gathering was to choose which of the seven would be proclaimed High King, and that, it appeared, was a mere formality. Rathreen had proven himself on the field of battle and in the council chamber; he was old enough to be wise but young enough to wield a deadly blade; and his army was the largest and best trained of the seven. He had no rival.

At first hearing, the information pleased Kedrigern. It provided a motive for someone to hire assassins who would make certain that Rathreen was not anointed. It took him only a moment to realize that it provided a motive for so many possible culprits that it was completely worthless. The six rival kings were likely candidates; so were jealous members of his inner circle, old enemies who wanted to get their revenge before Rathreen was too powerful to touch, outlaw chieftains and robbers who saw their careers in danger, anarchists with some murky design of creating chaos; or a hundred others, with motives ranging from inscrutable to mad. Perhaps it was a display of power by the Lord of Shadows. Kedrigern pondered the situation and was still muttering grumpily some hours later when they entered the great hall where their host awaited.

While Kedrigern grumbled, Princess exulted. The hall provided a spectacle she dearly loved and too seldom saw: men of distinguished appearance, lovely ladies in silk and samite, the glitter of gold, the wink of jewels, beauty and strength and grace and stateliness. And to her delight and Kedrigern's pride, when she passed through the doors, all eyes turned to her.

She wore a gown of deep blue. Her hair shone like polished onyx, her eyes bespoke unfeigned pleasure, her every movement was graceful. A single ruby glowed in the circlet around her brows. An intricate golden necklace, a gift from generous dwarfs, was her only other adornment. In truth, she required no artful adornment to be the cynosure of all eyes. Kedrigern, in a tunic of homespun stuff of a greenish-grayish-tan color and comfortable old boots, might have been wearing his scarf of invisibility.

"They're all looking at us," she said softly. "Isn't that nice?"

"They're looking at you," he said, placing his hand on hers, which rested lightly on his arm. "Be kind. Reward them with a smile."

She did so, and then dug her elbow into his side. "Now it's your turn.

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Stop looking so gloomy. Nothing's happened yet. Everyone is very pleasant and cheerful."

"Yes. Even the six assassins," he said, forcing a faint smile.

A tall white-haired man with narrow pale eyes broke from the crowd. "My lady Princess! Master Kedrigern! Your fame precedes you. Welcome to my humble home," he greeted them. "I am Magon of the Perilous Mount, master of Le Château Malveillant."

Princess's curtsey was the epitome of grace. Kedrigern bowed stiffly and said, "You honor us, my lord."

"When my good friend and comrade-in-arms Rathreen sent word that you were to be of his party, I rejoiced. Your fame precedes you. Such beauty!" Magon exclaimed, his eyes fixed on Princess. "You must dance with me this night, my lady. I will be the envy of every man here."

"I look forward breathlessly to our dance," said Princess, and Magon's pallid face glowed.

"Indeed, indeed, and...yes...breathlessly. Oh my, yes." Gathering his wits, Magon said, "My duties call me. Until then...no tricks, Master Kedrigern. Don't make her disappear. Mind you, no tricks," he repeated, beaming in anticipation. "A jest, you see. Tricks. You're a wizard, so...."

Kedrigern forced a polite smile. "Of course. How slow I am. A witty sally, Your Majesty."

As Magon returned to the crowd, Kedrigern said to Princess, "The man thinks I'm a performing magician. I wonder if he expects me to juggle and cut capers."

"He's only being pleasant. He seems like a nice old king," she said.

"He wasn't always. Thirty years ago he was known as Magon the Mutilator."

"People change in thirty years."

"Yes. Now he's Magon the Wit," Kedrigern said through clenched teeth.

They made the acquaintance of two more kings, several knights, a grim baron, and a host of ladies of varied ranks. Princess soon stood at the center of an eager ring of young knights and squires. Kedrigern stood apart, discussing certain features of the castle with Magon's chamberlain, when Rathreen entered with a burly knight at either side and one behind him. The crowd hushed and parted to make way for him.

He was an imposing figure. The red beard of his youth was white now,

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and he displayed more scars than when Kedrigern had last seen him, but he stood as tall as ever and walked fearlessly, his eyes straight ahead and his stride confident.

With a familiar wave to Magon and a nod here and there, he went directly to Kedrigern. He drew the wizard aside and in low, urgent tones said, "The assassins got to work early. I disposed of one on the way here."

"That's good news. Only five to go," said Kedrigern.

"It only takes one," Rathreen growled.

"Still no idea who might have set them on you?"

"I started to make a list of enemies. When it got longer than my arm, I tore it up."

"I'd better get a few spells on you right away. One for edged weapons, one for missiles, one for — "

Rathreen raised a huge hand. "No! No spells. I mean to be High King when I leave this place, and I'll have no man saying that I can't protect myself."

Kedrigern frowned up at him. "Then why did you pay me forty crowns to come here? For the pleasure of my company?"

"I had good reason. The Lord of Shadows may try magic. Maybe one of my colleagues will. They're all blackguards at heart. If they do, I'll need you. But until they do, I want everyone to see that I defend myself with my own strength."

He had a point there, Kedrigern had to admit. But it was a purely political point, and flawed. "What if the magic takes you by surprise?"

"You're the master of counterspells, aren't you?"

"Yes. But counterspelling is slow work. You may have to wait a while. A long while." Rathreen said nothing. He stroked his beard in a slow pensive gesture, and Kedrigern went on, "Let's compromise. I'll put a spell on you to protect you from sneak spells. I'll leave defense against ordinary weapons up to you."

The beard-stroking slowed and stopped. Rathreen nodded, mumbled something that sounded reluctant, but finally said, "Fair enough. Magic against magic, steel against steel. Go ahead. Spell me."

That night in their chamber, where Kedrigern scowled and paced the floor, Princess was effervescent. The life of a great castle filled with noble

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guests was much to her liking, and she went on at great length about the courtliness and gentility she had encountered all evening.

"It's so nice to socialize with kings. Norgel was absolutely charming. He improvised a lovely ballade while we danced," she said.

"That's nice," Kedrigern muttered.

"And Everon told me of his first quest, when he was just a lad. Such a sweet story. He's a dear man."

"Um," said Kedrigern.

"And Magon dances so well!" she said, fluttering upward and twirling in midair. "He's as graceful as a young squire."

"I thought Magon would regale you all with sallies of wit."

"Don't be so sour. They're very nice people."

Kedrigern had had enough. He disliked deflating her illusions, but he was convinced that faith in the fundamental decency of kings would get her into trouble among this lot. "I remember them differently," he said. "Did the charming Norgel mention that he used to be known as The Sexton's Friend?"

"Was he active in church affairs?" Princess asked, delighted.

"You might say so. Sweet Everon specialized in sacking monasteries."

"But.... The Sexton's Friend?"

"He was called that because he kept the graveyards full. Everon's first quest was for plunder and nothing more. On his way home, he abducted a young damsel and claimed he had rescued her from a brutal guardian."

"Well, perhaps he had."

Kedrigern shook his head decisively. "Her guardian was the kindliest man in the shire. Everon cut off his head while he was sleeping. The guardian's, that is. And after carrying off a few more damsels, he seized the throne from Edward the Unfit."

She pointed an accusing finger. "You're making this up. There was never an Edward the Unfit."

"He was known as Edward the Gentle until Everon ousted him. When Everon learned that some of the nobles were upset by his usurpation, he offered to present them with irrefutable proof that Edward was unfit to rule. They assembled at his castle, and he killed them all. He then issued a proclamation that the late king was to be known henceforth as Edward the Unfit."

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After a long silence, Princess said, "He didn't mention that."

"And the rest are no better. Pendriff of the Peaks is probably in his chamber, plotting something nasty. A deft hand with the poison vial and the dagger in the kidneys, Pendriff. Horix the Silent is sure to be skulking in some dark corridor with a garrote. Skulking and garroting are his favorite activities. The seventh king is so sly and slippery that no one is certain of his name. The truth, my dear, is that the seven kings are seven cutthroats. Rathreen is the best of the lot, but that isn't saying much."

"Then why are you protecting him?" she challenged him.

"Because he's the only one who can keep the others in line. They all fear him more than they fear one another. If they unite under Rathreen, lives will be saved. Under a worse High King they'll become a powerful force for evil, and under a weak one the whole thing will collapse and life will be even more miserable for the peasants."

After a long pause to think on his words, Princess nodded. "It's not easy to be a good king, it?" she said with a sigh.

"For some, it's impossible."

She made no mention of her earlier speculation about the matter of family ties. Kedrigern wisely refrained from raising the possibility.

THE NEXT DAY passed without alarms. As Kedrigern made his way about the castle looking for likely ambushes and hiding places, he encountered Princess everywhere he went, chatting merrily with ladies, surrounded by adoring pages and squires, listening attentively to the boasting of a knight, laughing with a jester, or charming a king. She was obviously finding this visit to Château Malveillant a nexus of delights.

He was not. The place might have been designed by assassins for assassins. It was a maze of passages and corridors and galleries and rooms that opened onto other rooms, some with doors and some without, some of the doors with locks and bolts, others open to all comers. The king who permitted it to be built was either supremely self-confident or abysmally stupid. Perhaps both. Kedrigern resolved to set up a warning spell and stay close to Rathreen.

The second attempt came at the banquet that evening. Kedrigern had given instructions that he was to sit at Rathreen's side, with Princess next to him. The three bodyguards stood behind their master's chair, and

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Rathreen's men took places about the hall. Several dozen pairs of eyes, plus a warning spell, seemed ample guarantee of safety.

A polite suggestion from Princess, accompanied by one of her most persuasive smiles, had induced Magon to have his cook prepare a dish of sautéed morels for her husband. Kedrigern beamed happily at the sight of his favorite dish and dug in with a will. While dining, he kept on the alert. He studied faces, observed movement, checked every doorway and corner, high and low. All appeared well.

A gallery ran across the upper level of the hall facing them. Halfway through the morels, Kedrigern noticed a faint light moving in the lancet arch directly opposite. He had not seen a light there before. When the light ceased to move, he became curious. He drew the medallion from his tunic and raised it to peer through the Aperture of True Vision.

"Rathreen! Down, quick! Guards, take cover!" he cried, and pulled Princess to the floor beside him.

They had scarcely made it to the floor when there was a great thud and crash behind them. Kedrigern turned and saw three crossbow bolts deeply imbedded in the back of Rathreen's chair. The light still burned in the lancet arch. He jumped to his feet and shouted to the others to follow. When they reached the gallery, they found three crossbows fixed firmly to a bench. A weighted string attached to their triggers was still smoking where it had burned through.

Blowing out the candle, Kedrigern said, "Clever. Not ingenious, perhaps, but clever. The candle burns the string, the weight drops, the bolts are released."

"Not so clever. Can't correct the aim," Rathreen said.

"No need to. Once the dinner started and we were all in place, the odds were you'd stay put long enough for them to do the job."

There was no chance of tracking the assassin; nothing for it but to return to the dining table and carry on as though an attempted murder were a customary entremets at such affairs. To add to his chagrin, Kedrigern found the morels cold.

His sleep that night was troubled. A warning spell lost potency as its range was extended. If the next attack came from a distance, he might not see it coming in time. And in his annoyance, he had expended precious magic to warm up the morels, a foolish bit of self-indulgence.

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At the ball the following night, guards were posted at the corners of the gallery and at every doorway. The musicians sat on a platform at one end of the room, first being checked for weapons. The music began, and soon all thoughts of danger were lost in the pleasures of music and beauty and grace as the dancers traced their intricate figures, turning and crossing, retreating and advancing, twirling and bowing. Kedrigern, who was not much of a dancer, pleaded duty and kept to the sidelines. To his surprise he observed Rathreen footing it as briskly as a young squire. All to the good, he thought; safety in numbers.

He looked around, observing the dancers, the watchers, the entrances, the gallery, alert for any furtive movement, any suspicious behavior, anything out of the ordinary. He saw nothing amiss. He was using a stronger warning spell that reached to every corner of the great hall. It was undisturbed. The situation seemed to be in hand. Nevertheless he felt uneasy.

He took a goblet of wine and climbed to the rear of the musicians' platform for a higher vantage point. The hall was well lighted, and that was a help. Candelabra stood at intervals along the walls and torches were mounted higher up. Three huge gilded chandeliers, each bearing scores of slim candles, depended from the high ceiling. He looked up at them, and noticed one that began to sway ever so slightly. As he watched, the chain trembled like a plucked string and the chandelier swayed more noticeably. He looked to the floor, and saw Princess and Rathreen, each in a different line of dancers, converging to cross directly beneath the chandelier. As he looked up again, the warning spell gave a sharp tweak and the chain parted.

He flung out his hands and cried out a command. The chandelier came to an abrupt stop and hung in the air a forearm's length above the shocked dancers. At his second phrase, it began to rise slowly, smoothly, until it was once again in place and firmly secured.

Two ladies fainted, as did a knight who had been injured in the lists that day. To Kedrigern's great relief and pleasure, Princess glanced coolly up at the chandelier, turned, smiled, and waved to him. Stepping daintily over the fallen knight, she walked calmly to his side, escorted by Rathreen.

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"Very nicely done," she said for all to hear. "I know what a strain it can be to do heavy magic without time to prepare."

"No trouble at all, my dear. Are you all right, both of you?"

"Just a drop of wax on my gown," she said, spelling away the gobbet with a phrase.

"And on my beard," said Rathreen. "She's a brave lady, your wife is. Braver than most of the men in this hall."

"One can't allow these things to ruin an evening. Shall we finish our dance?" Princess said, extending her hand.

Rathreen gave Kedrigern a wondering glance and led Princess to the floor, where they took their place beneath the chandelier. Kedrigern gave an urgent signal to the musicians, who had been sitting on their platform, mute with shock. The music began, the dance resumed, and Princess was the heroine of the evening.

Three down, Kedrigern thought. Three to go.

THE NEXT DAY, he stayed close to Rathreen and Princess. He decided to abandon warning spells, preferring to trust to his senses and conserve his magic for emergencies. He had no reason to think that Princess was a target for the assassins, but last night's incident had underscored the true nature of the challenge at hand. The Lord of Shadows was not troubled by the death of innocent bystanders.

Following events made that very clear. As they passed through the hall, Princess took a ripe apple from a bowl in the hall. "I saw the boy bringing them in this morning," she said, holding it up for their inspection. "Don't they look delicious?"

"They do indeed," said Kedrigern, snatching the fruit from her hand and holding it carefully by the stem. "But they're not for eating."

"They look perfectly all right to me," she said.

Rathreen smiled. "Come now, Kedrigern. The poisoned apple is the oldest trick in the assassins' manual. Only an amateur would try it. We're dealing with a sophisticated professional."

"Trust me," said the wizard.

He summoned a servant to remove the bowl and destroy its contents, then led them to the stables, where flies buzzed about their rounds in great

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number. Drawing his dagger, he cut the apple in half and laid the pieces on the ground. The flies quickly took notice and gathered on the juicy surfaces. Before Kedrigern had counted to twenty, the apple and the ground around were covered with a carpet of flies who would buzz no more.

"Thank you," Princess said softly.

"Well done, Kedrigern," said Rathreen. "I had no suspicions."

"Never overlook the obvious. I'd like to hear about the first attempt," said the wizard.

"A one-legged beggar we met on the road. I stopped to give him a coin and he tried to put a dagger into my heart. Would have, too, if I hadn't been wearing a mail shirt under my tunic."

"Surely he didn't get away."

"Before I could seize him, he put the dagger into his own heart."

Kedrigern thought for a time, and at last said, "The Lord of Shadows employs a heterogeneous work force. Your beggar behaved like a typical fanatic. But the one who set up the crossbow was obviously not eager to die for the Lord of Shadows or anyone else if he could help it. The one who dropped the chandelier was clever: that called for planning and perfect timing. Whoever put out these apples clearly wasted no time planning and had no intention of risking his life to get the job done."

"What do you think we can expect next?" Rathreen said.

"I haven't the faintest idea,"

"Look on the bright side. Only two assassins left," said Princess.

Rathreen chose to look at the dark side. Once again, he reminded them that it takes only one.

As they left the stables, they heard an angry shout from a stablehand. The man turned to them, holding up a small metal dart. It had wide vanes, a short shaft, and a long, narrow head with a very sharp point.

"Look at this, your honors," he began, flourishing the missile. "Some fool shot this thing — " A shout from their left interrupted him, and then a third from their right. They saw men plucking similar darts from the ground, shaking their fists as they looked about for the source.

"If that's the work of my men, I'll have their hides, the reckless idiots!" Rathreen snapped.

"I don't think.... Take cover!" Kedrigern cried, seizing Princess's

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hand and pushing Rathreen toward the nearest stall. The stablehands were close at their heels. All but one of them made it safely to cover before the hail of darts, a hundred or more, came down all around them. The man who had been caught in the open took one in his shoulder. He ran on for five more steps, then staggered, stopped, and crumpled to the dirt.

As soon as the shower of missiles ended, Kedrigern ran to the fallen stablehand and yanked the dart from his shoulder. It had not penetrated deeply, but the rigidity of the man's body and the dark paste smeared on the point made it evident that a scratch sufficed.

"The first three darts were to get the range." Kedrigern shielded his eyes and scanned the upper levels of the castle. "The assassin had to have a clear view of the ground. We'll find some kind of catapult in one of the towers."

A boy was sent to the castle with word of the attack. The dead man was carried off, and the rest of the stablehands drifted away in twos and threes, glancing up at the skies from time to time.

"This one was smarter than the fool with his poisoned apple," Rathreen said.

"Neither one cared how many people he killed. There must have been a hundred darts," said Princess. "And each one tipped with poison."

A deep bark drew their attention to the gate. A large hound came through and broke into a fast run, heading straight for Rathreen, all the while barking eagerly. Rathreen laughed and opened his arms to welcome his favorite hound. "To me, Balista!" he called. The dog leaped up and laid his forepaws on his master's shoulder. Tail wagging wildly in joy, he began to lick the face of Rathreen, who laughed, tugged at Balista's ears, and scratched his sides. It was a scene to warm the heart, and Kedrigern and Princess looked on smiling.

Suddenly the dog's hind legs gave way. He collapsed, whining, and struggled to rise, but could not. Rathreen stooped to help him, and fell to his knees. He cried out in pain and clapped his hands to his face, then crumpled to the ground writhing and groaning. Kedrigern dashed to the nearest stable, took up a bucket of water, and flung it full into Rathreen's face, which had already turned a deep red. A second bucket, and Rathreen sat up, weak and dazed, gasping in pain but out of danger. Balista lay dead at his feet.

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"Fiendish," murmured Kedrigern as they walked beside the litter on which Rathreen lay. "As soon as the dog started licking Rathreen's face, the poison went to work to kill them both."

"But you saved him. And that was the sixth attempt," Princess said, squeezing his hand. "Rathreen will survive. It's all over, and he's safe."

Kedrigern's mind was working furiously. Much as he wanted to, he could not bring himself to share Princess's confidence. The poisoned apple had been an amateurish tactic; just a bit too amateurish to be believed. What if it had been merely a ruse to make them careless, to get them walking about outside where the darts could be used? Had the assassins taken to working in teams? Were apple and darts, or darts and dog, or all three, a coordinated attempt? It was possible.

Rathreen would need constant care for the next few days, and Kedrigern was determined that he remain under heavy guard. The six promised attempts had been made, and all had failed, but he feared that he had not seen the end of this affair. He was not willing to trust the word of the Lord of Shadows. All the earlier attempts might have been preparations for some ingenious masterstroke, deadlier than the rest because unexpected. A few days earlier, Kedrigern would have ridiculed this suspicion; but now that he had seen the Lord of Shadows' handiwork, he felt differently. The full Moon was still three days off.

Kedrigern spent the next two days poking about in the castle from dungeon to the highest tower, looking for he knew not what. Rathreen remained in bed, guarded by his trusted three. Princess and Kedrigern supervised his treatment, swabbing his face with healing waters at sunrise and sunset and applying a theriacal salve of great potency four times a day. No one else entered the room.

Rathreen emerged from his chamber on the morning of the third day, well and strong, to attend the council at which the High King would be chosen. It was obvious from the moment of his appearance that he would be the choice, and so he was.

When the hoorahs had died down and the oaths been solemnly sworn, the company withdrew to the topmost platform of the castle so that Rathreen might address his loyal liegemen on a site where all could look out on the newly united land. He took his place facing the battlements,

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three of his subject kings on each hand, an expectant assembly of knights, nobles and ladies encircling him. As he raised his hands for silence, a masked figure in black suddenly appeared within the crenel opposite him and with startling speed loosed two arrows that sped straight for his heart. They stopped a fingernail's breadth away and dropped harmlessly to the ground at Rathreen's feet.

"The Lord of Shadows himself, if I'm not mistaken," said Kedrigern, stepping forward from the crowd to confront the would-be assassin. "I was expecting you."

"And who are you?" demanded the archer.

"I am Kedrigern of Silent Thunder Mountain," said the wizard with a deep bow, "and you needn't bother reaching for another arrow. Everyone here is under my protection."

"And who protects you?" With a smooth swift motion, the man in black drew a dagger and sent it at Kedrigern. It described a loop and returned to a position directly before his breastbone.

"My wife looks after me," said Kedrigern, bowing to Princess, who curtsied in return.

The man in black snatched the dagger from the air and returned it to its sheath. "You have interfered with my plans," he said, his voice icy with malice.

"It's our turn now. We have some interesting things planned for you."

The man in black laughed. "You'll never take me alive."

"Ah...so you know about the rope," said Kedrigern.

"The rope? What about the rope?" said the man in black.

"I've removed it."

The Lord of Shadows was silent for a long moment, then he gave a scornful laugh. "You lie. You're bluffing. No one knew about that rope but me."

"Don't take my word for it. See for yourself."

"A bluff. Trying to trick me. The rope...," the man muttered as he reached behind him and groped about below. His groping grew steadily more frenzied. The ground was more than a hundred feet straight down, and the rocks were sharp.

"You cut my rope!" he cried.

"It's much too good a rope to cut," Kedrigern said. "I simply

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unfastened it." A wave of his hand, and a coil of sturdy black rope lay at his feet. "An excellent rope," said the wizard, taking it up. "The black is a nice touch."

"That's my rope...."

"We'd be pleased to hang you with it, but since you don't plan to be taken alive we'll have to forego that pleasure," Kedrigern said with a smile. "You may jump whenever it's convenient."

"Let us not be hasty. I'm willing to discuss terms. I have valuable information."

"We don't need your information. We've figured the whole thing out for ourselves. Pretty obvious, actually," Kedrigern said. He was conscious of uneasy voices rising around him.

"Don't be a fool," the Lord of Shadows said, his voice shrill. "Only I know the truth. Why do you think I sent six assassins when I could have done it easily with one?"

Six kings shouted a command in unison. Every guard on the battlement loosed an arrow at the man in black. Their impact drove him backward, and he fell without a sound except for the far faint thump of his landing.

An instant later the six kings had flung themselves at Rathreen's feet. Magon said, "Thank heaven we were able to save you, Your Majesty!" and the others all babbled similar emotions and fumbled to kiss Rathreen's gloved hand, or knee, or boot, or whatever was available in the crush.

"I shall always remember your loyalty," the High King said.

RATHREEN AND HIS bodyguards left for his stronghold that very day. His clerks stayed on to tidy up administrative details with the clerks of the other kings. The camp-followers and assorted vagabonds dribbled away unnoticed. The goal of the assembly had been achieved, but the general feeling was that its success was momentary and hope for enduring was small. No denunciations had been voiced and no accusations had been forthcoming, but every king now looked at his peers with new distrust. Le Château Malveillant became a very uncomfortable place, and Kedrigern and Princess were happy to leave it.

"Whoever takes the place of the Lord of Shadows is going to do a brisk

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business these next few years," Kedrigern said as they rode homeward. "Those kings will be at each others' throats before the month is out."

"Do you really think they were all in on the plot?" Princess asked. "It seems so unkingly. I'm sure my father would never have done a thing like that."

"Your father was an exception, my dear. I don't know if this lot worked together. I suspect not. It seems more likely that each one approached the Lord of Shadows privately and made his own deal." He laughed and shook his head. "That would explain the uneven quality of the attempts. Each one got what he paid for."

"So did Rathreen. I'm very proud of you," Princess said.

"I didn't do much, actually. The warning spell, and the protective spells. And that levitation."

"Levitations can be very strenuous. Especially the impromptu ones. I thought you did extremely well."

"Had to, my dear. You were under the chandelier. Pity you only had a chance to work one spell. A very opportune one, I must say."

They rode on contentedly, turning to smile at one another from time to time. Kedrigern's spirits were always best when he was heading home, and aside from all the murders and attempted murders, Princess had had such a delightful time at Le Château Malveillant that she was content to be returning to the privacy of their cottage for a time—provided it was not too long a time.

Kedrigern broke the silence. "I've been thinking. I really ought to pay Rathreen a quick call before we go home, and put a few good strong spells on him. I feel sort of responsible for him now."

"That's understandable. Does he have a nice castle?"

"It's rather austere. He has a good chef, I'm told. And an excellent wine cellar. All plundered, of course, but from the very best sources."

"Then let's go," she said.

By the middle of the following day they were within sight of the towers of Rathreen's castle. They stood in silhouette against the horizon, far out to sea. The weather was fine and the sea smooth, promising an easy sail once they found a boatman. As he surveyed the castle and the shoreline through the Aperture of True Vision, Kedrigern frowned.

"Is something wrong?" Princess asked.

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"Possibly. I'm not sure.... That horseman," he muttered.

"It's only a single rider."

"Yes, but it looks like...." Kedrigern raised the medallion to his eye and studied the lone rider. "It is! What's he doing here?" he cried in alarm.

"Who? What's wrong with him?" Princess asked.

"Everything! I must speak with him. Wait here."

He guided his horse down the sandy slope. Once on the strand, he galloped to the side of the gaunt figure on the gaunt horse, who turned to receive him. They had met several times before, and their relations were cordial. "Hello, Death," the wizard said. "What brings you here?"

"Strictly business, Kedrigern. It's always strictly business with me. No time for social calls. Never a minute to catch my breath, just work, work, work. I'm collecting a fellow named Rathreen," Death said, adding with a gesture of his scythe, "He lives on that island."

"Rathreen...is your client?"

"Yes." Death raised his sandglass, checked the time, and said, "He's just choked on a fishbone."

"Oh, no!" Kedrigern groaned.

"Oh, yes. No mistakes. I'd love to stop for a nice chat, but I have a busy schedule, so if you'll excuse me...."

"But what a waste! I've spent the entire past week saving Rathreen's life," Kedrigern said, looking peevishly at Death.

"Oh, I am sorry, you poor fellow," Death said with genuine feeling. "You must be absolutely *devastated*. All that wasted effort. That's the worst part of this job. I'm always inconveniencing someone."

Kedrigern waved off the apology. "I'm not complaining for myself. I was well paid. It's the local peasants that concern me. Rathreen was the last hope for this part of the land. Now that he's dead, his six vassal kings will revert to their old habits in no time. The war and pillage and murder will start all over again and the peasants will suffer terribly."

"Ah, yes. You do have a soft spot in your heart for peasants. Six vassal kings, did you say?"

"That's right."

Yellowed teeth flashed within the black cowl. "Did your lifesaving duties take place in a castle called Le Château Malveillant, by any chance?"

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"Yes, they did. Why?"

Death chuckled dryly, dustily. "Le Château Malveillant is my next stop. A return call, actually. This time I'm to collect six kings: two poisoned, one stabbed in the vitals, one garrotted, one manually strangled, and one drowned in a vat of wine. Malmsey, I believe. Also a crowd of henchmen, cronies, and lackeys who have met violent ends: decrenellation, backstabbing, throat slitting, that sort of thing. I'm sure they're a dreadful lot. Not a single soul to exchange a word with on the way. I just know it's going to be a terrible afternoon." Death sighed, and concluded, "But that's the nature of this job. I don't pick my clients."

Kedrigern sympathized. "There's one king who fancies himself an amusing fellow. Magon's his name."

"Oh, spare me the amusing ones," said Death, his deep sepulchral voice pained. "They're the worst of all. They chatter away while everyone else is trying to moan and lament. Charon can't abide them, with their splashing about and rocking the barge and urging everyone to sing 'Row, Row, Row Your Boat.' *Dreadful* people. And of course everyone blames me for their behavior."

After a moment's awkward silence, Kedrigern said, "Well, Magon probably doesn't feel so amusing now."

"I sincerely hope not. But thank you for the warning."

"My pleasure." Kedrigern sighed and slowly shook his head. "So they did each other in."

"Very effectively," Death said.

After a long and thoughtful silence, Kedrigern grinned. "Things work out, don't they?"

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Now that we've got a bibliography of our first fifty years on our Website, it shouldn't be too hard to confirm the theory that we have published more fiction by writers named Robert than by storytellers of any other name. It's just a hunch, but when you add up the many contributions by Bobs (such as Messrs. Reed, Leman, Young, Abernathy, Silverberg, Aickman, and Heinlein), they probably outnumber all the Toms, Lisas, Sonyas, and even the Isaacs in our pages. Of course there's also this guy Sheckley, who has graced our pages with a slew of sly and funny stories over the years. His latest takes us to outer space, which remains one of the few places where a person can go to find some solitude.

The Forest on the Asteroid

By Robert Sheckley

NOW THAT YOU HAVE COME all this great distance to my little world, I beg of you, ladies and gentlemen, sit down and relax. After all, what is the rush? The ship will wait for you, believe me. You have paid well for this chance to meet me, and the ship will be there when you want to leave. But what if it isn't? Does it really matter? Are you really in such a rush to get to the next place? What lies at the end of any of these hectic enterprises of the human spirit but a chance to spend some time in this gray, cool, soundless place of mine? When a man is not going anywhere, on a journey that has no end, he can afford to take his time!

Now, not for the first time, I regret the lack of any busy-work to keep my fingers occupied. How clever the old wives were, to have a bit of sewing always beside them. Penelope must have given herself many pleasant hours, spinning the great web that occupied her days. And was she regretful when she unraveled it at night? I don't think so. Spinning the web by day and undoing it at night, it was all busy-work.

Forgive me. My thoughts sometimes take a melancholy turn as I sit

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here in the dusty old house, in my writing room, looking out over the unweeded garden, with the white light coming out of a white sky, all of it a tabula rasa resembling my mind. But not much in the way of pictures form there. For lack of stimulation, my mind remains as blank as the translucent sky that looms over this place.

There on the wall are Arthur's guns, his fishing rods, and several steel-jawed traps. He used to enjoy these sports, back in what seems another age, when there was energy to burn and time to burn it in. I can even remember, so dimly as to make it more a matter of faith than of recollection, a time when I was eager to get up each morning, when I could hardly wait to finish breakfast and rush out to see what marvels the new day held. That was before I had exhausted the possibilities of this little world. When all the world seemed fresh and promising. Before time and grief took their toll. Back in a day and age that has passed unconsidered, a time when love and adventure seemed possible.

None of that is quite true, of course. But sometimes I like to imagine I was born here, rather than inheriting the place after Arthur's unfortunate demise.

But what can I do about it? Nothing seems possible now except what was done and done to death in all the yesterdays that I have lived here.

I hope you find all this more than a little charming, and curiously quaint. I live alone on a tiny asteroid. You think, what joy! Here's a man who has it all. A tiny world he can walk around in less than a day! An entire world to itself, an asteroid with its own atmosphere, with its ancient house, placed here god knows how or by whom, with its unkempt garden, its self-replenishing larder, its silent robot servants who do what is required and speak not, its forest that covers the entire surface of this little world. You say to yourself, this place is perfect, except that one might want a woman to share it with. But then you think, it would have to be a perfect relationship or it would become intolerable.

You think again how perfect for one with a hermit turn of mind, one who is not attracted to bars and shows and movies and rude entertainment.

But, you wonder, is it possible there is nothing to do here? Perhaps this man telling the story is lazy. Surely, somewhere in the forest in which this

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house resides, there is something, some mystery, a recondite matter worthy of investigation.

I assure you, gentlemen, there is none. Or if there is one, a single unique feature, be assured that I, and you, too, if you lived in my place, avoid it like the plague. I embrace the usualness of my daily round instead of stumbling once again over that thing which was not planned, not put here by the architects and builders.

Yet such a thing did happen here. Such a circumstance did occur. But not to me. I did not live here then. This asteroid world belonged to my friend and benefactor, Arthur.

I see that I have piqued your curiosity. But I assure you, I had no intention of doing so. I was but making a point, not proposing an adventure.

Anyhow, it was Arthur's asteroid, you see, and at the time of this story I was just a guy on Earth, in e-mail correspondence with him. Arthur and I had been schoolmates at Black Sycamore University in Vermont. Arthur had soon made the discoveries that made his name famous, and brought him in a lot of money. He didn't care about money until he conceived the idea of living on his own planetoid.

It was not a plan that would appeal to everyone. Most of us like a bit of company every now and then. Not everyone! Not Arthur. Arthur used to envy the anchorites, those early fanatics of Christianity who went out to waste places in the desert, and there lived alone and unloved, rapt in their religious contemplation.

Arthur was not a religious person, but he did have some things he wanted to think about, and wanted that thinking to be pleasurable and without interruption.

Arthur wanted to live in a state of rapture. He didn't think rapture was reserved only for the religious — like a supernatural present from their hypothetic God. No, rapture was for anyone with the guts to do what they had to do to get it.

Thus, after he had patented his unique formula for actualizing an imaginary Rhiemann set — or something like that — I'm not much on science, myself — or perhaps it was his invention of the self-replenishing electrical circuit. After he had done these things, and began reaping the

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profit, he bought himself an asteroid. It was not too hard to find one for sale. The biggest difficulty, he told me in his e-mails, was finding the correct agency to pay the money to.

After that it was a matter of drawing up his ideal living setup, one he had dreamed of for a very long time. In his mind's eye he could see the comfortable lines of the house, the big porch, the view of distant mountains. He was able to sketch out exactly what he wanted, down to the split-rail fences. Then he hired a secretary intelligent enough to translate his desires into actualities. I was that secretary, of course, and Arthur's dream became mine.

MONEY WILL BUY YOU any dream you want. All that remains is for you to fit yourself to it. This can be desperately hard work, to judge from Arthur's experience on his world.

The first weeks went by without difficulty. Arthur was occupied with testing his equipment, making certain that everything worked as it was supposed to. The place was still under warranty, you see. But everything worked as it was supposed to. The artificial gravity, a third less than that of Earth, gave him a sense of lightness and vigor. The robotic servants were silent and self-effacing, reluctant to put forth any sign of "personality," for personality was what Arthur had come here to get away from. Nevertheless, their silent, programmed self-effacedness and their concern for his wants, programmed though they were, gave him a sense of protection, as if he were living with ideal grandparents.

The force-seeded forest came up nicely.

Then plants and the constituents of plants grew, as close to simultaneity as makes no mind. The plants had to have those things without which they could not flourish, even allowing for the irresistible way life has of maintaining itself under difficult conditions.

Good times in the Arthur rancho! While I sat home on Earth and paid the bills. But never mind, I'm here now, that's all that counts. And I was well paid for my part in keeping Arthur's dream operative. I'm not complaining.

Arthur said he never felt lonely in those days. He was too vigilant to permit that emotion to live in him, too well trained, too self-schooled in

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the discipline necessary to keep a good thing good without the all-too-human tendency to destroy it by trying to make it better.

In the evening, after the artificial Sun had set behind the range of purple-topped mountains which Arthur had terraformed, he would take one glass of the incomparable wine he had imported from France — one glass and no more. He was not being stingy — he had wine that would last far behind his own life. He was being careful. Trying to tread the path of the aesthete rather than that of the gourmand. Trying to remember that measure is everything. Some more caviar, my friends? And will someone pass the toast points?

No, it was not loneliness that assailed him. But it was something. That is to say, he became aware that something in his scheme of things was not right.

When you live on your own asteroid, my friends, you accustom yourself to putting up on the skies images of what you want to live with. You are after a certain harmony, after all. You don't want strangeness in this place. You have opted out from Earth and her innumerable mysteries; you have come to live here, a place without any mystery at all, yet something is not right — could it be that there is something inexplicable here?

When you base your life on aesthetics, little things like "Is there a mystery here?" tend to take on great weight and moment. Something is not right! You take it as a clarion call to action. You don't doubt it. You assume the truth of the statement. You set out to find out what is wrong. To learn what the mystery is.

Arthur told me how many days he sat on the glider on his front porch, looking at the range of mountains he had had constructed. They were green now, crowded with growing things, most notably trees and grass, doing nicely with the substitutes for insects that his scientists had come up with. Because once you start trying to create life on a little world, practical difficulties begin getting in your way. You lose all of your time trying to figure out a schedule for moulting season and what the ideal rainfall should be.

For the sake of simplicity, Arthur had dispensed with insects, considering other ways of bringing their benefits to plants in ways sometimes tortuous and clumsy, ad hoc to say the least. But the cost was containable

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on a little world, and Arthur got his trees and grass one way or another. The next question was, what else was out there on his world?

Imagine that thought as a way of shooting yourself in the foot. You've gone to the considerable time and expense of building your own world. Nothing can live here except what you brought in. But you become convinced there is something else here, something alien and sinister.

You determine to find this alien intruder and demand an account of him. But this, proposition-wise, is putting the cart before the horse. The first question is, is there some creature on your world, sharing it with you without your permission or consent?

The fact that Arthur chose to stake his actions on the inference of otherness shows the character of the man. It was his nature to test such an ultimate conclusion. When you try to prove such a premise, you are staking your life on its importance. If you're smart, you include the negative of the discovery: You could say that Arthur staked his life on the idea that discovering there was nothing there would be as satisfying as to discover there was someone there; for such became his life ambition.

I can empathize with Arthur. I have that sort of mind myself. Luckily, however, with a bit more common sense and a stronger instinct for self-preservation.

Arthur made his choices and I, when my time came, made mine.

When the time comes to make a choice, initiate an action, produce a defining action, the mind has the bad habit of postponing the point of beginning almost infinitely, making you live Zeno's paradox of Achilles and the tortoise.

Or one's position is as in Shakespeare's great speech in *Julius Caesar* — "Between the acting of a dreadful thing and the first motion, all the interim is like a phantasma or a hideous dream. The genius and the mortal instruments are then in session. And the mind of man, like to a little kingdom, suffers then the nature of a resurrection."

How true those words were of Arthur's state of mind! He had to find out. And with what iron discipline did Arthur gather a few possessions, set his alarm clock, and, when it had gone off, left his house to explore his asteroid, to find the unknown thing which, he was now convinced, lived in the mountains and ravines on the far side of his world.

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* * *

When Arthur went out exploring that morning, he took the little path that led into a weed-grown ditch, scrambled up the other side, and found himself in a small clearing. That in itself was strange: nothing on the ground plan had indicated any such clearing in the dense vegetation that covered this place under its force-dome. He walked into the clearing slowly, although there was absolutely nothing to fear in this place.

Ahead of him he could see the line of trees where the forest commenced. And there was something else there, something dark and indistinct against the tree line. He couldn't quite make it out, but it appeared to be about the size of a person or large animal. As he moved closer, the thing, whatever it was, turned abruptly and vanished into the dark woods.

The presence of this creature gave him an excuse for walking, and so he walked on, hurrying a little to keep the dark object in sight as it slid through the trees.

He went on. There was no rush. The light was always of an even tenor in this place, and the amount of land to be covered was so minuscule that a man could go around the world twice without tiring himself appreciably.

The creature ahead of him darted in and out of the underbrush. Arthur only wished he could get a better look at it. Although he seemed to be moving faster than the object, yet it kept obstinately ahead of him, neither gaining nor losing much ground, and giving no evidence of trying to evade him.

"Hey there! Wait up!" Arthur called, for there seemed no reason to make a chase out of this. But the creature (as he assumed it was) either didn't hear him or refused to acknowledge his presence. Annoyed, Arthur broke into a trot, and now indeed he seemed to be gaining on the being. He was definitely drawing closer, he could make out the human shape of whatever it was, though he couldn't hazard a guess yet as to its sex. It seemed to be dark and shaggy, though it might have been wearing a garment of some sort.

This was enough to wonder about right here. Let's stop a moment and consider. If Arthur had had the power, he would have frozen the frame right there, and asked himself, "How did a gorilla creature come to be on my asteroid? I certainly never authorized the creation of such a thing. In fact, I stipulated that no animal-type creature (in which category I

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included mankind and the insect kingdom) should be created or in any way introduced into my asteroid. So assuming it wasn't a prank on the part of some flunky in one my subunits — which I doubt, since it would be a very expensive prank...."

The creature must have got here somehow, not of its own will and intention, perhaps, but we will examine that question later. For now we are still in the flush of speculation that accompanies seeing an unnatural thing.

A gorilla on an asteroid is more of a mystery than a man on an asteroid. The man could have had his reasons, perhaps surrealist or dadist ones, but reasons all the same. The gorilla, so we are told, does not think in this way, not abstractly, not like we do, at least some of us, and at least from time to time. The gorilla has no reason to be there. His case is simpler than that of the man, whose reason must be elicited.

My stop-action interjection should perhaps be ended now, since we are rushing toward the defining moment, albeit in an Achilles and the Tortoise manner.

Arthur pushed his way through the underbrush. He could see a rocky outcropping to his left, a steep wall of rock, smooth and without handholds. It served to hem in the thing, for now he saw a precipice to the right, a crack in the asteroid's surface, not too wide, yet wide enough to make it impossible for the being to jump across. And the outcropping and the precipice angled together, so that, at the point where they met, he'd have the thing trapped and could inspect it at his leisure.

He hurried on, and noticed that the creature had reached the end of the impasse, and had turned, facing him. Its features were still obscured by underbrush, but Arthur thought he could make out a white face, a pale oval within the dark furriness of the thing. It looked at him, and it made a gesture, which Arthur interpreted as an imploring gesture, for the creature was also making a pushing motion with its hands, as if to beg Arthur to turn back and not pursue this matter any further.

For one moment Arthur thought of acceding to the creature's apparent wishes. That would make a fine story! He imagined himself telling me, "And so, seeing that the creature wanted nothing to do with me, seemed in fear of me, I halted, I made a sort of salute, wishing it well, and I turned and came back the way I had come."

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Yes, a good ending. But Arthur was not content with it. Had he run all this way merely to give up at the end, to give up in response to a presentiment so vague as to be barely mentionable?

(Here, in case you needed it pointed out, was Arthur's error. He didn't accede to the creature's wishes. Didn't leave it alone. To do that and live with the consequences of his action afterward would be greater pain than to plunge on now.)

LESS THAN a dozen feet separated him now from the thing, and he was growing very tired. He must have been running on this asteroid for hours, seduced into believing his strength greater than in fact it was due to the low gravity. But he'd have plenty of chance to rest soon. He tore through the final remaining bushes and came up to the thing itself.

It was manlike, and it was large, and it had its back to the sheer stone of the precipice. As Arthur came up, the creature suddenly launched itself at him, fangs bared, hooked claws outstretched.

Before that, however —

Arthur saw the creature. And then, instead of taking to his heels, which might have saved his life, he pushed his head into the creature's face, as though trying to look into its deepest soul.

Maybe they were using different signaling systems. Either way, the creature thereupon proceeded to tear Arthur apart limb by limb.

An ugly way to go. I don't want to tell it. But I have sworn to tell everything here.

"That's how he died," Lambert explained later, to his friends, when he met them back in the feasting-place on Earth. "Frightfully torn, with a look of horror on his face."

"I see," the hypothetical friend says. "And you?"

"Arthur willed everything to me. I was perhaps the only other person he knew who could appreciate his asteroid. And it didn't hurt that I was his old friend and college chum."

"And when you got here — did you go out in search of the creature?"

Here the questioner might pause and consider for a moment. "No,

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you wouldn't, would you? Still, you had to do something, didn't you? Stands to reason, doesn't it? What did you do?" At this point in his tale, Lambert always paused, took a drink of whatever was beside him, and, a half-amused smile on his face, said, "I did nothing."

"But the ape — "

"This arrangement seems to suit it. We don't intrude on one another's space."

"But he could suddenly attack and kill you for no reason, or no reason that you'd understand."

"Why would he do that?"

You shrug. "Shit happens."

"I pretend it doesn't."

"But does that work for you?"

"I figure I'm doing okay. I've got my own asteroid. And I have my own perhaps invisible gorilla."

"But why do you do that? Why didn't you investigate, find out?"

"This is difficult to explain," Lambert said. "But I have learned one thing in my many travels. In places of danger, it is best to go in courageously and face what comes up. But in places of safety, where you can be sure nothing ever happens or ever will happen, it is best to hang back, take thought, desist. The mysteries of dangerous places are such that a man can explore. But the danger in safe places is uncanny, as if the universe itself decreed that no place is to be allowed to exist without its dark and impenetrable uncertainty. Facing danger is one thing, my friends, and I've done enough of that in my time. But when it comes to uncovering mystery — a wise man leaves the mystery in place, and does not try to penetrate to its banal secret."

"You think the thing was banal?" the friend persisted.

"Oh, no doubt. It might have been something as commonplace as a gorilla, living alone and bothering no one, until Arthur's pursuit drove it to the extremity of attack."

"A gorilla," his friend mused. "But how could a gorilla have gotten on this planetoid?"

Lambert shrugged, smiling. "That is part of the mystery which I, for one, do not intend to look into."

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Kate Mason attended the Clarion workshop about five years ago and published a story last year in Mota 3: Courage. *She lives in central New Jersey. Her first story for us puts a new spin on an old fairy tale concerning The Poor Miller's Apprentice.*

The Millstone

By Kate Mason

WHATEVER HE TOLD YOU, it isn't true.

First of all, I did like him. Second of all, I didn't mean to leave him in the woods; I thought he was right behind me. Third of all, I wasn't the one who insisted he sleep in the goose house when he got back. And fourth of all, whatever else he's told you, he's dumb as two rocks. But surely you could see that for yourself.

Did you get all that down? Okay then. Where was I? Oh yes — how stupid Hans was.

Well really, that's where all the problems started.

I was in the summer of my tenth year when my father sold me to Collum the Miller. They both called it an apprenticeship, but I've always believed you should tell the truth, however ugly it may be. And the truth is, I was a slave in a little mill in a little village, miles from anywhere.

Collum already had another apprentice named Caynard. He was a couple of years older than me, and mean as a horse who's been stung by a wasp. He was also a lot bigger than me — half a foot taller and a whole

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lot heavier. It looked bad for me for a while there, but a few months after I arrived, Hans showed up. That saved me. Between my naturally winning nature and Hans's stupidity, Caynard suddenly took a liking to me.

How stupid was Hans? You know, I hate to speak ill of him. He's a powerful man these days.

Yes, I understand you'd want a complete record — for future generations, you say? Well, I suppose I do have a responsibility to history. And it isn't hard to come up with examples.

Once, Caynard told Hans that dead bodies don't bounce. Yes, that's right. Caynard said, "That's how healers tell if a patient is dead. They collect the person's friends and relatives together, lift him up, and drop him. If he doesn't bounce, the healer leaves — nothing more he can do."

And Hans believed him. Caynard could hardly tell the story with a straight face, but Hans believed him all the same.

Another time we were swimming in the millpond. Caynard told Hans that if he could hold his breath, dive underwater, and stay under until he passed out, it would be a sign he'd be wealthy and successful in life. So Hans did it. Took a big breath, dove down and stayed down. Caynard just sat on the bank and laughed. When Collum came along to see what we were up to, he saw Hans at the bottom of the pond, and he dove down into the water and rescued him. Lucky for Hans.

He was quite sick after, but he kept asking Caynard when he'd get rich.

What, me? Well. I wasn't much of a swimmer, you know. And Hans so seldom bathed — I thought if he stayed in the water a little longer, it couldn't hurt.

But I hope you'll note that I myself never took advantage of Hans's feeble-mindedness. I merely observed it.

Well, then. I'd been working for Collum for several years when he called the three of us together. It was midsummer's eve, and the whole village had spent the day drinking and dancing. By midafternoon, Collum was well and happily in his cups, and for once in fine spirit. I remember his cheeks were all red and his eyes were glassy. He had a big smile, and Collum never smiled. He was an unhappy man most of the time. And cheap. But now he pulled out three gold coins and handed one to each of us. Caynard and I just looked at each other.

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"I know you boys have wanted to go into the city," he said. "Here's a little money for each of you. Go and have a good time. I'll see you back here — oh, let's say the day after tomorrow."

Caynard and I both knew Collum's good mood was due entirely to the drink, and since we couldn't know how long the drink would maintain his pleasant spirits, we knew we needed to leave before he could change his mind.

We'd wanted to buy ourselves horses for a long while, and we were young enough that we thought those small coins meant we finally could. So we set off for the city. It was a pleasant spring day. The Sun was shining and warm, but not hot. The road to the city goes through the woods, and it's quite pretty. Still, it was a longer walk than me or Caynard expected. As to Hans — well, we didn't invite him along, but he came just the same. He was always tagging along.

Hans said that? Really. Well, I guess Caynard did say something about how Hans was too stupid to find a decent horse, and how he'd be better off staying in the village. As I said, Caynard didn't much like Hans. I had to walk between them, to keep Hans safe from Caynard's blows. It's true.

But as I was saying, it was a longer walk than we expected. When the Sun went down, we were nowhere near the city. The woods were thick, it was getting dark fast, and we had to find a place to spend the night.

I don't mind telling you, Hans was worse than useless — quivering and shaking and calling for help. Pathetic. And frankly, Caynard wasn't a whole lot better. I don't like to think what would have become of either of them without me.

I looked around and spotted a small cave tucked into a low hill a short distance off the road. Telling the other two I'd find us some shelter, I charged through the woods and up the hill. Caynard and Hans straggled along behind me.

About halfway up the hill, I reached the cave. I yelled down to the others to come join me. They staggered and slipped, and I had to help drag them up the slope, but they finally made it up to the cave just as full dark was falling.

The next morning, Caynard and I awoke shortly after sunup. Caynard panicked — he was afraid of close spaces. "We've got to get out of here, it's

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not safe, it's dark here, what if there's something back there...." You can imagine it for yourself, I'm sure.

"All right," I said, "just let me wake Hans — "

"Forget about Hans!" Caynard said. "He's a stupid sluggard!"

There was no arguing with that. But my mother — may she rest in peace — always told me to be kind. "Hans does the best he can," I told Caynard.

Caynard said, "I'm leaving!" and ran to the cave mouth. He stopped when he reached the edge. It wasn't that much of a drop, but Caynard was afraid of heights. He took several steps backward and collided with me as I followed after him. I was worried about him, you see.

"Look," he said. "Hans is a millstone around our necks. With him along, every horse peddler in the city will try to swindle us. He's stupid and dirty, and he doesn't pull his own weight. I say we leave him here."

"Now, Caynard," I said, "be fair."

Caynard grabbed my arm, hard. Twisting it, he pulled me toward the drop-off. "I say we leave, and right now."

I confess, I was young and impressionable and scared. And I was also a lot smaller than Caynard — as I believe I told you. He dragged me away from the cave and down the slope. I protested a few times, but he kept telling me to shut up. Finally he turned around and grabbed my ear. "If you mention Hans one more time," he said, "I'll gut you, here and now." He drew out his hunting knife menacingly.

I was young, and fear won out. I can tell you, I've regretted that decision ever since. In fact, when we got back to Collum's, I did organize a search party to try to find Hans. Would you like to hear about that? It's sort of an interesting story —

Okay. No, no, I understand.

Well. We went to the city. As you can guess, we didn't find any horses we could afford with what little money we had, but we enjoyed ourselves all the same.

When we returned, Collum was peeved that we'd lost Hans, but he wasn't *that* peeved. After all, Hans was pretty worthless. Mostly, I think Collum was sore that one of his coins had been lost with Hans still attached to it. Given time, though, he forgot about it.

I suppose you know seven years passed before we saw Hans again. It

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was late spring. I remember it was one of the first really hot days of the year, when being inside the stone-walled mill was actually a relief. On days like that, Collum always sent me and Caynard out to run errands, so he could stay inside and be cool. He'd just sent us out to bring in some bags of grain. When we got outside, we saw a bedraggled, pathetic-looking boy coming up the road. He was filthy and tattered, and as he got closer I could tell he smelled like rancid meat. Until he greeted us with that silly simpering smile of his, I had no idea who it was. But that smile could have belonged to no one else.

Once I got over my shock, I ran forward in delight. All those years I'd thought something awful had happened to him — eaten by a bear or a dragon, or taken captive by some thief in the woods. And here he was —

But let me tell you, you don't want to hug a man who hasn't bathed in seven years. Well, maybe he had bathed, but I don't think so. Hans would take any excuse to avoid cleaning himself, you know. He smelled much worse than stale sweat — something like dog turds and cat piss, left out in the hot Sun. I gagged when I got within ten feet of him.

And his clothes! Just falling off his body. He'd grown in the intervening years, of course, so the tatters of his trousers hung around his knees. They were ripped in several unseemly places, but at least there were no women at the mill. He had no shoes, and in fact claimed he hadn't worn any in years. His shirt was nothing more than strips of filthy cloth. I can't remember what color his clothes had been, but they were dingy gray with dirt now.

As I said, I stopped where I was. I tried to figure out where I could stand that I'd be upwind of him, but wherever I went, the smell of moldering cheese followed. I was still coughing and choking when Collum came out to see why we hadn't brought any of the grain in.

"I'm home!" Hans chirped, as if nothing had happened.

Collum stopped dead. "Hans?"

"Yes, sir," Hans said. "You're looking good, sir."

"Where have you been?" Collum asked him — as if he had just been running late from an errand.

Hans gave us all another of his silly smiles. "I was serving a cat."

"What?" I asked.

"I was serving a cat. When I woke up in the cave that morning, you

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were gone. I got scared and ran out, but I didn't see either of you. I ran through the forest, calling for you, but I couldn't find you. And I couldn't find the road, either. Finally, I stumbled into a clearing, and there was this little tabby cat, just sitting there, like she'd been waiting for me."

"Uh-huh," I said.

"The cat seemed to know I was lost. She knew everything about me, actually. She said, 'Hans, I know what you're seeking and I know you're lost. I can help. If you agree to serve me for seven years, I'll give you the finest horse you can imagine.'"

"The cat said this?"

"Yes, she did. She was quite nice about it, actually. So I agreed, and she took me to her castle. There were lots of other cats and kittens there. They all seemed very happy to see me. They kept talking about not having a thumb of their own." Hans frowned — this last bit was obviously over his head.

"So you went to a castle full of cats, where you've been serving them for seven years."

"That's right. Although — gosh! — it only feels like a few months to me!" Again that stupid smile of his.

I couldn't decide what to think. I was pretty sure *he* believed his story — though that didn't prove much. But it did make a certain sense. Only an idiot like Hans would agree to serve anyone for seven years in exchange for a stupid horse. And a cat! Cats are always looking for people to be their slaves. That's why you need a firm hand to deal with them. Kind of like women that way. And there are always plenty of fools who will rush about bowing and scraping to a pretty girl, when it should be the other way around —

Oh, all right. I'll stick to the story. Sorry.

Well. I thought about everything he'd said, then asked, "So the cat said she'll bring your horse — "

"Within a few days."

"And you believed her?"

He shrugged. "Of course."

I shook my head. "Of course."

I turned away, and half a minute later burst out laughing. I mean, what would *you* have thought?

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The afternoon was getting on, and Hans headed for the house.

"Where do you think you're going?" Collum asked. "You're not going in the house."

"But, sir — it's late, and I've had a long walk — "

"And you smell like the devil himself! God, boy, when did you last wash?" He snorted. "If you stay here, you're sleeping in the goose house tonight."

"The goose house? But that's so small. And sir — those geese are mean."

"It's that, or sleep on the open ground," Collum said.

At that very moment, there was a loud boom of thunder. An afternoon storm was sweeping in. Hans was afraid of all storms, but thunderstorms in particular. Sort of a shame, really, since the rain would have cleaned him off. But as soon as he heard that thunder, he turned and ran, straight for the goose house, and disappeared inside. The geese made the most awful racket when he went in, but then they calmed down. I don't understand why he wouldn't just wash up — clean himself off, put on some new clothes. I think he had the idea the cat wanted him dirty. Made no sense, but Hans rarely did —

The next morning, me and Collum and Caynard were starting our morning chores when a glittering white coach pulled by six all-white stallions stopped in front of the mill. I couldn't see who was riding inside at that point, but there was a footman up front, dressed in pressed formal clothes — black hat, black trousers, a starched white shirt, and a long black coat.

The footman jumped down and opened the door to the coach, and a woman in a long, flowing white dress stepped out. She was beautiful: raven-black hair and curves in all the right places. I wasn't well-traveled, but even I recognized her — the Princess Esmerelda.

I admit it: I goggled.

"Where is Hans?" the princess asked us.

Caynard started to laugh hysterically, and I had to kick him to shut him up.

Collum was the only one who could respond. "Hans is in the goose house," he said.

"Bring him to me," the princess said.

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So I ran over to the goose house. Hans came stumbling out, pulling at his tattered clothing to try to cover himself before her.

The princess went over to him and clasped his hands in hers. "Hans, my faithful servant," she said. "I've brought you the horse I promised you."

"You're the cat?" Hans asked.

What an idiot. I'd figured that out the minute she appeared.

"I *was* the cat, my dear Hans," she said. "Now, I am your princess."

She motioned to the footman, who brought forth a seventh horse, another stallion, tied to the back of the coach. It must have stood seventeen hands high, and it was so white, it seemed to glow in the sunlight. Hans, of course, just got that same silly grin on his face.

Collum trotted over to the horse and started stroking its neck, his eyes alight with greed. "Well, Hans, my boy," he said. "You've certainly done well for yourself. As I always knew you would, of course." He looked at the princess. "Brightest boy I ever had here. I knew from the day I set eyes on him, he'd be the one to take over the mill when I'm gone."

"Hey," Caynard said, who'd been promised the mill years earlier. "That's not fair — "

I kicked him again to shut him up.

"Hans no longer needs your mill," Esmerelda replied coolly. She turned to Hans. "For seven years," she said, "you served me without question. You chopped wood for me in the winter and fanned my face in the summer. You were never cross or demanding. Not once did you show the slightest sign of avarice. You saw your service as its own reward. You have proven yourself the perfect husband."

With that, the footman dragged Hans off to the millpond, threw him in, and started cleaning him up. You know the rest of the story — he married the princess, became king in time, had lots of lovely children, and so on and so forth.

Caynard and I, of course, didn't fare so well. Caynard got himself killed in a tavern brawl a few years back. Not that surprising. And I'm still here, waiting for Collum to die, waiting to take over this miserable little mill.

The one thing I want you to get down for your history is this: I was a good friend to Hans. I always treated him decently. Once he left with the

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princess, though, I never heard from him again. Nothing. Not a word.

But if it hadn't been for me, he never would have been in the forest that day, and he never would have found the cat there, and he never would have married Princess Esmerelda, and he never would have become king. I *made* Hans who he is today.

I'd say he owes me one.

Wouldn't you?

"If you're a walrus, it's perfectly normal. If you're a seal, you should have come to me sooner."

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PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS

PAUL DI FILIPPO

On the Internet, Nobody Knows You're Adorable

STANDING on the doorstep of the innocuous suburban house that Friday afternoon, I nervously straightened my tie, smoothed down my cowlick, and swallowed a mouthful of saliva. I hadn't been this nervous since asking Jeannie Medieros to the junior prom twenty years ago. But then again, it was not every day that I — that anyone, for that matter — got to meet Vigny Maguire, one of the most mysterious presences on the Internet, and simply the finest amateur critic ever to submit a reader response to Amazon or Barnes & Noble.

Maguire's work had first appeared just a year and a half ago. The earliest Maguire post that anyone had been able to track down was attached to the listing for *Who Would Jesus Do? A Christian Guide to Premarital Sex*. In just under a hundred-and-fifty words, Maguire had brilliantly torn to pieces this opportunistic, trashy self-help book by the rock group Creed, displaying the savage wit and flair for the well-turned phrase that would come to characterize all his subsequent reviews. (A wit and verbal dexterity that I now feared would be turned against me for daring to violate his privacy.) Swiftly following this post had come dozens of others on all the big bookseller sites, commenting on a carefully chosen selection of novels, story collections, popular science books, military histories, memoirs, cookbooks — just about any type of book that the marketplace offered. Maguire's dissections of these titles were always amusing, accurate, insightful, and heartfelt. In short, he manifested all the qualities of a consummate professional reviewer, except that he was doing all the work for free, and remained resolutely shrouded from the public eye.

Within the past six months, a fanatical fandom had coalesced around the faceless Maguire and his reviews. (I myself admired his work

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immensely.) He had become the Thomas Pynchon of amateur online reviewers. A positive notice from him would send sales of even the most humble book soaring, while a negative blast would put a hole in the hull of even the most titanic bestseller. Publishers from Los Angeles to New York to London sought in vain to court a positive Maguire review, and lived in fear of a negative one. Hundreds of websites devoted just to adoration of Maguire had been set up, and an equal number of attempts to ferret out his identity had been launched. However, no one had successfully tracked him down through the thicket of shell accounts he worked through. That is, until now.

The literary cyberzine I worked for — *Saloon* — employed one of the world's finest hackers, a guy named Mack Bunratty, to defend the site from attacks. On a lark, my boss had asked Bunratty to try to get some hard data on Maguire. In short order, Bunratty had come up with what looked to be Maguire's true ISP provider and an address lifted from their accounts. Now here I stood. My assignment as junior editor: to get Vigny Maguire to come to work exclusively for *Saloon*.

No point in waiting any longer. I pushed the doorbell button and held my breath. What would Maguire look like? I wondered in the eternity it took for my ringing to elicit a response. Would he unleash on me one of his patented caustic jibes? Perhaps something akin to the line he had dropped on Norman Mailer's newest collection of essays, *Rumblings From My Gut*: "If this guy weren't already dead, it would be necessary to uninvent him." What rewards could I possibly offer this rebellious lone wolf, this independent-minded citizen of world literature, that might convince him to write solely for us?

The door swung open.

A frazzled looking housefrau, clutching a toilet scrub brush in one hand and the fist of a wailing toddler in the other, confronted me with a look of pure exasperation.

"Mrs. Maguire?" I chanced. "Mrs. Vigny Maguire?"

"No, I'm sorry, there's no one here by that name. Now, if you'll excuse me — "

Bunratty had sworn a hundred arcane hacker oaths that this address was the origin of the Vigny Maguire postings. Plainly Maguire's wife had been instructed to turn away strangers looking for him. But I couldn't give up so easily.

"Mrs. Maguire, please listen a

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minute. I know your husband values his privacy. He's not a showboater, not a greedy man. His only god is good writing. But I think that my arrival here unaccompanied by a horde of media people should serve as testament to my honest intentions. If I could just speak to your husband for a moment — "

The woman's exasperation increased, especially when she noticed that the momentarily unmonitored toddler had begun chewing on the toilet brush. "You listen to me. My husband is named Hank Spindler. He's a salesman for Amalgamated Tile. If you're one of those sneaks from Consolidated Terraces trying to get a preview of the new Delft-tone line, you're plumb out of luck."

The woman's sincerity was undeniable. I was baffled. How could this be — ?

"Mom, this guy's here to see me. Let him in."

From behind Mrs. Spindler emerged a fourteen-year-old girl. Long brown hair, average good looks, skinny undeveloped frame. She wore a Hello Kitty T-shirt, cargo shorts, and jelly sandals.

"Vigny? Vigny Maguire?"

The girl laughed. "You got me. Although most people around here call me Leia."

Mrs. Spindler seemed even more confused than I was. "Leia, what's this all about?" She narrowed her eyes. "Have you gotten in trouble with that computer of yours?"

"No, no, not at all," I hastened to reassure Vigny Maguire's Mom. "Far from it. Your daughter is something of an Internet celebrity. I'm just the first person to track her down."

"I don't know what to think — "

"Oh, Mom, chill out, okay? What's your name, mister?"

"Stan. Stan Capaldi."

"C'mon in, Stan."

Before I had really gotten over my shock, Vigny and I — Leia, really, I supposed I should call her — were seated on a couch in a quite unexceptional rec room. Overflowing bookshelves were the room's main decorative motif — aside from a television large enough to illuminate a football stadium, with Xbox and well-thumbed controllers attached. Infant toys were scattered across the deep-pile rug and a set of Franklin Mint commemorative teddybear figurines sat proudly in their own display case. As I tried to compose my thoughts, Mrs. Spindler brought us Pepperidge Farm cookies and some kind of synthetic lemonade. Leia

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seemed content just to nibble on a cookie and smile at me in a disconcertingly sardonic fashion, so at last I framed a question, just to break the silence.

"So, how come Vigny Maguire?"

"Avril Lavigne and Lizzie Maguire."

"Oh, sure...."

"I suppose you want to know if I really wrote all those reviews, or if some adult did."

"That question did occur to me."

"Well, put your mind at rest. I did 'em all. I've been reading at college level since I was ten years old. You should see how many extra-credit reading assignments I've handed in. My school had to put a limit of A-plus-plus-plus on their grading system because of me. But it was only a couple of years ago that it hit me."

"What? What hit you?"

"That I could talk back to the people who made books. Y'know, make the publishers listen to me. Help other readers steer clear of bad books and jump on the good ones. It was all thanks to the Internet, of course. Back in the day, I would've never had such a chance. I never could've done anything like this without the web."

"Uh, Leia, do you actually realize the, um, stature that Vigny Maguire has acquired in the literary marketplace?"

"*Duh!* I hang out on the Vigny Maguire sites, don't I, Stan? Sure I realize it. That's most of the fun!"

"Leia, certain authors are slitting their wrists because of your reviews. Others are filling their bathtubs with champagne."

Leia shrugged. "Nobody forced the losers to become writers. And the winners deserve it. It's all part of the game. Besides, other critics and reviewers have powers like mine. Maybe they're not quite so influential, but the basic deal is the same. My so-called power only comes from the fact that millions of people happen to agree with me. You're just objecting to my role because I didn't turn out to be some hairy-chested college professor like you expected me to be."

I started to protest, then was forced to admit to myself that Leia was absolutely right. If I had encountered the Vigny Maguire of my fantasies, this discussion would've never happened.

"You're absolutely right, Leia. I was being prejudiced by your age. You've earned your accomplishments, and no one should try to take them away from you."

Leia visibly relaxed, and I became aware that much of her bravado had been a defiant, nervous

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facade. "You're not gonna narc me out, then?"

"Far from it. In fact, the magazine I represent wants you to come to work exclusively for us." I laid out the terms we were prepared to offer, then waited nervously for Leia's response.

"Hmmm.... Free books, a paycheck, no censorship like the commercial sites lay on me — sounds totally sweet."

"Leia, that's wonderful! So can I assume we have a deal?"

"Sure. Just one last thing."

"What?"

"I want to meet Avril Lavigne and Hilary Duff."

"*Saloon* has a little cachet. I think that can be arranged."

Now Leia was bouncing up and down like any excited teen. "And, and, oh yeah — Michael Dirda too!"

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Bruce McAllister is the author of two novels, Humanity Prime *and* Dream Baby. *From the 1960s through the mid-1990s, he published a slew of sf stories in* Omni, Asimov's, Galaxy, *and here in* F&SF. *After a ten-year hiatus, he's writing his fiction again (finding time while working as a book and screenplay consultant in southern California) and we're pleased to welcome him back with this short and elegant piece.*

The Seventh Daughter

By Bruce McAllister

THE AMERICAN BOY LIVED with his parents in a small villa high on a hillside above a cove where young people danced at night, laughing and shouting, their voices rising through the olive trees to him as he fell asleep. Sometimes he did not know which was the real story. The Ligurian Sea below him in the night, where a poet had drowned long ago. The laughter and shouting below him that drowned out the whispers of that sea and the mutterings of that poet. The boyish face he saw in the mirror when he dared to look. The things he made of paint and clay and words that only he knew about. It didn't matter, he told himself — it was all real and yet it was not — but the question was always there as he fell asleep and woke.

In the top drawers of his bedroom dresser, with every color of modeling clay, he had made a world and knew its story perfectly. "The Seven Daughters of Satan," he called it. He'd built very carefully the valley, the forest, and the seven villages where the daughters of Satan, who had abandoned them, had grown up. The men of the villages were scared

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of the daughters, beautiful as they were, because they knew who they were. The daughters showed no dark gifts, no witch's skills or demonic tendencies, but the men of the villages felt it: *The waiting.* The waiting for *him.* The entire valley and the mountains that surrounded it were waiting. If you held your breath and stayed entirely still, you could even hear it: The ticking of God's great clock. The hour didn't matter. What mattered was that the ticking never stopped. The men heard it as they stared, hearts breaking, at the faces of the seven daughters, and did not take a step toward them. The daughters did not understand. They could not hear the ticking, They did not know how much the men wanted them.

The daughters kept more and more to themselves and the men said less and less. A child might run up to one of the girls and say something, hand something to her, take something away, even play with her. But the adults never took such a chance. The daughters grew more sullen, their white faces and their red lips once like seven Sleeping Beauties, but now like fading ghosts. *He will return,* the villagers whispered to themselves. Inside their thatched house, in which the daughters had grown up and in which they slept side to side on mats on a clay floor, they had a deaf nanny to watch over them. The nanny could not hear the ticking either, and was growing blinder each year as well.

Each daughter had a dresser built years ago when the daughters were little by men from the villages. In each daughter's dresser there were seven drawers, and in the top drawer, made of clay and fashioned by the nanny's son (who lived with them but slept in a separate room) was a replica of the village in which the daughter had been conceived and born. The villagers knew that late at night little people of clay, homunculi, were brought to life by supernatural power and moved through the clay village in each drawer to entertain the lonely daughter it belonged to.

One day the boy, who was not from this valley but knew its story, found the smallest and prettiest of the daughters and stood before her, big and gangly in his dark suit, his skin on fire from self-consciousness. She was, he saw, as scared as he was.

"Are you my father?" she asked.

"No," he answered. "I am a boy."

She nodded, smiled a little, and let him take her in his arms, dancing her across the cobbles of the village square to music that came not from

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guitars or other instruments, but from the throats of the villagers as they stood and watched and began to hum, the sound soon filling the valley like the voice of God.

Before long every daughter was dancing and the clock stopped its ticking.

When strains of 1950s songs like "Diana" and "Heavenly Shades of Night" and "Candy Man" and all the others reached the boy from the *lido*, that outdoor dance floor in the cove far below his bedroom window, he would lie in bed thinking of the boys and girls — a few years older than he and flirting in another language — dancing. He would not get up. He would not turn on a light. He would listen to the songs until he fell asleep. As he slept he dreamed long, adventurous dreams of strange places, heroes and creatures worthy of legends, but also shorter dreams about hills covered with vipers and funerals of his relatives and a little boat in a storm, sinking, and it was these shorter dreams that came true. Why they did, he didn't know. It made no sense, but what did in life anyway? The longer dreams became stories which he wrote in longhand and kept secret from his parents in the drawer right below the seven daughters, which he also kept secret.

The ones that came true he never wrote down. It frightened him to do so. When he woke from his dreams, he would go to school with his friends from the village, or go down to the wharf by himself to find seashells among the colorful fish in the nets, or walk along the dirt road that led from his house past the walls with their brave green lizards to the Hotel Byron. One day his parents said it: "That hotel is too new. It *couldn't* be where they lived." "Who?" the boy asked. "Mary Shelley and her husband Percy," they answered. "The woman who wrote that book. The one about the monster. *Frankenstein.*" Not long after he would learn from someone that Percy, her husband, the poet, had drowned one stormy night in his little boat as he made his way from Viareggio up the coast back to this very village.

When the boy was back in his own country and the dreams — the ones that came true — had stopped, and he no longer wrote stories or made things of clay to put in drawers, he learned that that woman, Mary, had dreamed her dream — the one that had become her sad and terrible book — in that little fishing village, too.

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Often, years later, when he was a man and had a wife and children, he would try to remember what had happened to the drawer and its mountains, valley, villages and people of clay. "The Seven Daughters of Satan," he had called it. This he could remember, but he could not remember what had happened to that clay. Did it matter? Weren't people — your wife, your children — what mattered? Then one night, as he lay beside his wife, she put her arm over him and whispered in the dark, "*Thank you for setting us free,*" and he knew which story it was and how there would never be anything as real (because love is what makes things real) as this.

"The cookies are all gone, but there's still some Girl Scout in the fridge."

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Most of Bert Cowdrey's recent stories (such as "Rapper" and "Danny's Inferno") have been set in Mr. Cowdrey's home turf, New Orleans. His new one takes us abroad in the company of one of the more distinctive characters to grace these pages for some time.

Silent Echoes

By Albert E. Cowdrey

WHATEVER YOU COULD SAY about Curt Blanck (a lot and none of it good, according to his stepbrother Roger), he wasn't crazy. Maybe that was why Curt decided to ditch Missy Lemieux, lovely and lustful as she was. Missy *was* crazy.

One spring day in the eighties he took her to the Alpha Omega beer bust on Frat Row near the Tulane campus, saying that Bubba wanted to meet her.

"You'll like him. He's real kind of cultured," Curt explained as he parked the car. "He goes to concerts and shit like that."

Missy was not easy to deceive. She'd been watching Curt drift away from her for months.

"What you mean is, I scare you and you're dumpin' me," she replied coldly.

Curt laughed. "*You* scare *me!*"

"Yes," she said in the flat, empty tone that Aunt Vee, back home in Toomsuba, Mississippi, used to call her "final" voice. Curt gave Missy a nervous glance from little brown-button eyes.

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"It's all right," she said. "I know it's over. I saw this comin' a long time ago. And you don't need to try palmin' me off on your goddamn bro — "

She stopped. Curt watched her with something approaching dread. He'd seen that look before. She was staring through the windshield, but for her the drowsy red-brick campus didn't exist. She was seeing something else.

"I guess I would like to meet Bubba," she said slowly.

"Great," said Curt, drawing a deep breath. "Wonderful!"

Missy had begun to give him serious qualms as they drifted apart — for instance, buying a .32 automatic and taking it to the police gunnery range to practice. Curt had grown up in Shreveport listening to country ballads about lovers who parted in the reek of cordite, and he'd been afraid the weapon was meant for him.

He plunged into a throng of sun-burnished beauties and sweating frat men. Missy was drifting along, a blossom of night-blooming cereus among cabbage roses, when Curt reappeared, dragging a thin freckled guy by the arm.

He performed brief introductions — "Missy? This is Bubba. Bubba? This is Missy" — handed her a plastic cup of beer, and evaporated into the crowd.

Roger (he hated the name Bubba, which was why Curt had bestowed it on him) wore a nice, anonymous suit, and his muted tie was lodged against his large white Adam's apple. Finding him nervous, shy, and deeply suspicious, Missy came on shy and suspicious herself.

"Is Curt really your brother?" she asked. "You don't look a bit like him."

"Not by blood," Roger explained. "After Daddy ran out on us, Mama married his father, so we were raised together."

"Well, I'm glad it's no closer than that," she sighed. "I think he is one of the most *boring* men I ever met."

Roger relaxed a little. Boring wasn't exactly the word he would have chosen, but then Curt presumably had never tried to drown Missy in a toilet bowl.

"How did you happen to meet him?" he asked.

"Oh, this awful sorority I belong to gave a party, and there he was, and

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afterwards I just had trouble shakin' him off. He sticks like a burr under a mule's tail."

She dimpled and he managed a shy smile. They found deep shade under a live oak, relaxed and chatted and sipped beer. Roger thawed quickly. Every sideways glance told him that Missy was beautiful, her profile pale and faintly greenish like the Moon. Under a summer frock her breasts were small but well defined. A dim fragrance hung about her that made him think of gardens at dusk and mockingbirds repeating all the songs they'd heard during the day.

He told her about the big news in his life, that he'd been offered a job at the Pentagon (Assistant Logistic Systems Analyst, GS-11) and would be leaving for Washington in a couple of weeks.

"Goodness," said Missy, "you make me feel so *country*." She seemed to think that a prospective worker at the Pentagon must know everything there was to know about war and peace, and Roger found himself holding forth authoritatively about matters he really didn't understand at all.

When she was ready to go, he drove her home to a slave-quarter apartment in an uptown garden. A wisteria vine clung to a brick wall like a gnarled serpent, and — good Lord! — in the wisteria a mockingbird *was* singing. Somewhere deep in his southern soul he'd always believed that love would begin this way.

He drove back to his micro-apartment in the graduate-student dorm in a daze, narrowly missing two pedestrians along the way.

SUDDENLY HIS REMAINING weeks in New Orleans, which had seemed to stretch out forever, became intolerably brief.

The next morning he called and asked Missy out. She refused, being booked completely, but when Roger explained how short his time was, she agreed to make excuses and dine with him that evening.

He spent a chunk of money on a dinner for two at Antoine's. During the meal Missy told funny stories about Curt's crudeness and lack of couth, and Roger actually found himself laughing at the bully who had terrorized his childhood.

They were waiting at a parking garage on Iberville Street for his car to

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be brought when Missy laid a tiny hand on his arm. In a pale pinkish cream dress, she looked untouchably beautiful. Roger had drunk only one glass of Chardonnay, but he was deeply, profoundly intoxicated.

She murmured shyly, "Roger, Honey, when we get back uptown? If you got time I'd like to show you my li'l apartment."

"You would?" he asked, unable even to hope.

Missy looked dreamily down the narrow street toward the river where a calliope on a steamboat had begun to play an old tune.

"Aunt Vee used to sing me that in my cradle," she reminisced, and in a thin lilting soprano sang, *He married the girl with the strawberry curl/ While the band played on.*

Just at this point Roger's car arrived. When the attendant hit the horn, Roger jumped two feet.

It was a long drive uptown, but he managed it. Inside her apartment, he tried to relax on a battered Victorian sofa while Missy mixed drinks. She sat down close beside him and launched into a monologue about herself.

"Aunt Vee — this old colored woman? took care of me while Daddy and Mama were drinkin' themselves to death? — she was the first to notice I was different. She called it bein' touched. By God or the devil, who can tell? All I know is, I hear what no others hear and I see what no others see."

Clutching his drink with his right hand, Roger laid his sweating left on Missy's thin shoulder. They kissed. They kissed again and she wet his lips with a little tongue like the dewy petal of an antique rose.

"Missy," he whispered, "Missy — I — "

"Oh, come on, Honey," she whispered. "Let's screw."

In her mouth the word lost all harshness, ending on a breathy little pursing of the lips like a sigh. "Let's scurrrewww," she murmured again.

When they reached her rumpled bedroom upstairs — lingerie hung on the tilted lampshades and the bed gave no sign of ever having been made — Roger's blood pressure was rising and falling like somebody going into anaphylactic shock. At first, as they wrestled around in the nude, it really looked as if nothing would happen after all.

But Missy, instead of complaining or, worst of all, laughing, sent him downstairs for a bottle of champagne that happened to be cooling in the

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fridge. When he came back they drank, arms entwined, and some of the bright ticklish bubbles seemed to escape into his blood. "I know what you need," she told him, and amazingly enough, she did.

She extracted a riding crop from an overflowing armoire, used it expertly, and after a while he was ready to mount and ride. "Oh, Rog, you were *mawwwwwvelous*," Missy breathed when it was all over.

He had the strangest feeling that she had reached into his head and plucked the word like a blossom. As he relaxed (lying, of course, on his stomach) and drifted into sleep that was matchlessly serene, he wondered how she could know so much about him, when she hardly knew him at all.

Was that what she meant when she said she saw what no others could see?

Next day Roger moved out of the dorm and into Missy's for the rest of his stay in New Orleans. The first few days and nights they spent in bed. Unfortunately, they couldn't stay there forever.

Missy up and about proved to be a difficult roommate. She could not or would not cook, so that mealtimes became a succession of po'boy sandwiches and Chinese takeouts. She never cleaned the apartment. Though she was far from stupid, Roger found her hard to talk to. She spoke a little French and German, read Nietzsche, and liked to play a CD of the *Symphonie Fantastique* on a boom box. Otherwise she was absolutely indifferent to art, history, current events, and life in general.

And there were the damn echoes.

Missy claimed that every event that ever had happened or ever would happen sent endless vibrations careening around the universe, and that being touched, she could hear these echoes. Half a dozen times Roger found her sitting among the shoes in the closet in her bedroom, like a child in hiding, because the room's echoes lingered in that confined space.

She could hear folks playing the *Jack Benny Show* on an old-time radio; a woman nursed a colicky baby and it cried all the time; a murder took place, and it was kind of horrible — somebody dying, gasping for breath, while somebody else laughed softly.

"I love this place," she sighed. "It is so *rich*."

Roger adapted as best he could. He cooked scratch meals, or they ate

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out; he cleaned the apartment and did the laundry in the Washateria on Magazine Street. When Missy proposed to have Curt over for dinner, he agreed, even though Curt stared at her with unconcealed longing while she unpacked the Chinese food and passed out the chopsticks.

After Curt had gone Missy was especially warm and fond toward Roger.

"I am so *lucky*," she said. "Imagine if I had wound up with somebody like Curt. He's got eyes like a junkyard dog, and probably just as much of a soul. You want to play some Monopoly tonight, Honey?"

Combining the board game with sex had originally been her idea, but if Roger disliked it he failed to say so. Soon they were both kneeling on the floor of their bedroom, Roger in PJs, Missy in a delicate pale green shorty nightgown, shaking the dice. The riding crop rested beside the board. Missy bought Park Avenue, built six hotels on it, then lay in wait.

"You land there, Honey, and *that's ass*," she giggled. And shook, shook those dice.

Life with Missy was, Roger admitted to himself, an experience. Yet he knew no way to go back to the life he had lived before he met her. And if he'd known a way he wouldn't have gone. A lush Creole meal with its layered spices might give you heartburn, but compared to starvation — well, there was just no comparison at all.

Eventually he had to go to Washington or lose his job. But after a week of separation (and a small fortune in phone bills for him) Missy got a direct flight into Dulles and moved into the small condo he'd acquired in Crystal City, Virginia.

When she called Curt to tell him that she and Roger were getting married, he was deeply shocked. Typically, Curt was in a frenzy to get rid of post-dated loves, yet resented the men who replaced him and sometimes stalked the women, just to see what they were up to.

When his phone rang he was in bed with Missy's replacement, JayJay Cooter. A moment before, he would have thought either of JayJay's muskmelon breasts worth more than Missy's whole pale thin body. But as soon as he heard about the marriage, he felt something claw at his chest from the inside.

"For Christ sakes, why?" he demanded thickly.

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"Who you talkin' to, Curt?" JayJay demanded.

He covered the mouthpiece and growled, "Nobody." Curt was not quick of wit.

"Well, I just thought I'd let you know," said Missy's far-away, die-away drawl. "I told Roger it'd be real nice if he had you as Best Man, but he said he'd rather have somebody he liked, so there you are."

"Missy, wait a minute — "

"Goodbye, Honeybun. I'll think about you every time I bag the trash."

A firm click was followed by a cosmic hum. Reluctantly, Curt cradled the receiver, only then noticing that JayJay had vacated her side of the bed.

"Where the fuck you going?"

"Nunnayaw business, Honeeeey," she answered, trying without success to imitate what she'd heard of Missy's nectar-sweet drawl.

For her part, Missy laid her own slender receiver down on the bedside table in Roger's cramped ecru apartment, smiling in a slow, peaceful way.

My, hadn't it all happened fast! Like a chess player moving a pawn, she'd showed Roger her ticket home and then waited, knowing that he just couldn't bear to see her go. After all, what could he do, advertise in the Personals section of the *Washington Post* — "SPWM ISO WF able & willing to give love & discipline"?

The larger question was why Missy wanted him. Just to spite Curt? She didn't like to think so. She preferred to think that she and Roger had this mysterious inward need, this — well, to sum it up, they were both into pain.

Of course, so was Curt. Birds of a feather *do* flock together. She still dreamed of Curt sometimes, especially when she and Roger were getting it on...sonofabitch bastard, Curt scurewwwwed so good and wild....

But Roger was all right. He tried hard. And when the carnality was over, they spent many quiet hours together. That was what people not into these games never understood, how deep the commitment, the *giving* was among those who saw pain as the ultraviolet in the spectrum of pleasure.

Sometimes they discussed Curt, not with affection.

"I always hated him," Roger confessed. "After Mama married his Daddy, he spent half his life beating on me."

Even to Missy he never admitted that, although he hated the beater, he rather enjoyed the beatings. Pain made him feel less guilty of...of...of

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what? Of his father's desertion? Of the sinfulness the minister at his hardshell-Baptist church was always carrying on about?

Whatever. With Missy, he didn't have to explain. Like some dweller in the fourth dimension, she could put her finger on his heart without breaking his skin.

"Honey," she told him, "don't you be worried about Curt anymore. I have already heard his death rattle."

Roger stared at her, then smiled. He was slowly, slowly coming to believe in the reality of her gift. Regarding Curt, he hoped she was right.

Missy had problems in Washington. Boredom, first and foremost.

"What shall I *do*, Honey?" she wailed, about the third week of the marriage. There was, of course, no question of her cooking or housecleaning, getting a job, or joining a garden club.

"You're always listening to echoes, Missy. Why don't you do that?"

"Roger, Honey, there *are* no echoes in Crystal Goddamn City. I mean, nobody's ever done anything here except work and sleep and poke their little wifeys or their boyfriends. It's the goddamndest dullest place I ever was in."

She almost added, "It's perfect for you," but stopped herself in time. She really intended to be a good wife to Roger.

"Then go somewhere with history. Christ, Missy, you're in the nation's capital."

So Missy took a White House tour and heard President Madison tell his wife, "I would say this only to you, Polly: Tom Jefferson is a greater viper than Aaron Burr."

When she gave this report, Missy added, "Who the hell is Aaron Burr?"

Yet the White House failed to satisfy. When Missy complained that the echoes were all dim and confused — which had caused her error about Dolley Madison's name — Roger explained that the place had been gutted and rebuilt a generation ago. There just wasn't much of the original building left.

"They get rid of everything good in this city," Missy said bitterly.

"Try the Capitol," he suggested.

She took a tour, and found the Capitol much richer than the White House. Almost too rich. In many a mosaic-patterned corner and ornate

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ladies' room, after she had escaped the prating tour guide and hidden herself to listen, the chorus of voices was so complex it gave her a headache.

Most of her questions Roger couldn't answer. Who was it gasping out, "My God, Sickles has shot Phil Key"? Whose piping voice compared a colleague to a dead mackerel in the moonlight? Who did she hear moaning as he was beaten with a stick that cracked and broke? Why, in a sub-basement one tour had penetrated, did she hear the roar of flames?

Roger had no idea. But he took the trouble to read a history of the building and found that all of these things were in fact echoes of its past.

All people who undertake to live together sooner or later discover the incomprehensible otherness concealed within the friend or lover they thought they knew so well. But Roger had more to discover than most. His uneasy feeling that Missy was mad slowly gave way to a deeper alarm, to the feeling that she was not quite — not quite — human?

For Christmas, she presented to him the *Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe*. Opening it, he found that she had copied on the flyleaf, "Is *all* that we see or seem/But a Dream within a Dream?"

He knew her well enough now to understand that for Missy, as for Poe, this was a serious question. She lived on the boundary of two worlds, and the one he called real bored her — as he did. She began to scare him, just as she had scared Curt in the past.

SHE DUG OUT her little shiny .32-caliber pistol and took it down to a police range in Alexandria for marksmanship practice. She began to experiment with makeup, and went at it so enthusiastically that her face came to resemble a large porcelain doll.

She became fascinated by Victorian underwear, bought abundantly at the shops in Pentagon City mall, and wandered around the house in complicated arrangements of silken straps, conical bras, frothy ruffles, and bayonetlike stays.

To see her so attired, with her stiff doll's face, sitting in his La-Z-Boy and cleaning her automatic — well, all Roger could think of was a Hollywood movie called *I Married a Martian*. He had never seen the movie, but he understood the predicament.

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He was changing, too. In the Pentagon, of all places, he was discovering the joy (unknown to prophets and dreamers) of doing a job well. Of winning respect. Of mastering a body of arcane knowledge that nevertheless had its uses in the world. His confidence grew; his waist expanded; he won promotions; his obscure feelings of guilt faded; he was looking forward to middle age.

Missy was headed in a different direction. She began answering ads in weekly newspapers inserted by people who were interested in "pushing the envelope." One evening Roger came home to find a couple named the Marrows in his living room.

Bella Marrow had the squarest shoulders Roger had ever seen on a woman; her husband, whom she called Dink, had tobacco-stained fingers and a habit of constantly licking his lips. They had brought with them a suitcase full of implements seemingly bought at a garage sale from the Spanish Inquisition. Bella showed Roger a gadget called a rectal expander and assured him it would take him "beyond pain."

Roger ordered Dink and Bella to leave the house, which they did under protest, because Missy had already told them that she and Roger were ready and eager to push the envelope.

Missy was furious. She spent a week of sleepless nights detailing his many failings to him. When he had groveled sufficiently, she agreed to play Monopoly with him, but the episode ended badly. She had to call 911 and accompany Roger to an emergency room because, instead of using the riding crop, she had taken out her pistol and shot him with a blank round.

His life was not in danger, but the deep burn in his backside was agonizing. One result was to end his long romance with childish suffering; that night, Roger discovered that real pain *hurt.*

The episode shocked Missy almost as much as it did him. She had never, never intended to do such a thing, and she didn't know what had gotten into her. She nursed him tenderly, never telling him that she intended to leave him as soon as something better came along. If he had known, Roger might have recovered sooner.

The marriage was over. And yet it ran on by inertia for almost another year, ultimately reaching an end that no one (except Missy, maybe?) had foreseen.

* * *

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When Roger was ordered overseas, he was glad to go.

The nineties had arrived. The Cold War was over. Military bases were being marked to be closed down and troops withdrawn. Logistical experts were needed, and Roger, now a GS-13, was TDY'd to Germany, to the city of Zweibrücken.

Six months later, after selling the Crystal City condo, Missy joined him in Quartermaster housing in the American military ghetto. The base had been in use a long time by many armies. The grimy barracks of the Kaserne had 1912 carved into the stone lintels over the doors, and Roger's dwelling was about the same vintage, a small stone house with deep-set double-paned windows to keep out the chill of autumn, which was the season when Missy arrived.

Roger was spending all day and then some at the office, working frantically with Inga, his bilingual German secretary, on the problems of shipping out American units. Missy spent a few days unpacking her things, and then set out to explore Zweibrücken by herself.

She bought a pocket dictionary and a guidebook at the PX and on her second day in-country, she put on a long coat and furry cap and walked down the hill in squeaky new boots, through manicured woods to the S-Bahn station.

On the train she stared covertly at the solid, beer-nourished men, the solemn apple-cheeked children going to school, the disapproving fraus who gazed at foreigners as if they were stray dogs who had wandered into Germany bringing fleas.

Fingering a map of the subway system, Missy rode to a remote stop called Station Goethestadt. This turned out to be a quiet suburb, with postwar housing that resembled barracks except for the lace-edged curtains in all the windows. Missy was wondering where to find what she was looking for when she spotted a neatly lettered sign directing her to *KL Goethestadt/Internationaler Denkmal.*

"My, they've got an International Memorial too," she thought, impressed, and set out at a brisk pace very unlike her usual Deep South saunter.

The concentration camp was kept neatly, like everything else in Germany, with well-raked gravel walks and large signs in various languages explaining the function of this bunker and that administration building. The echoes were fantastic.

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She walked slowly, picking up the sounds of many feet, a cacophony of shouts, dogs barking, waltz music blaring from a poor-quality public address system. At one particularly featureless spot, she heard with a special thrill heavy blows accompanied by grunts of rage or pain.

She felt like a child in a candy shop. Why, she thought, this place is even richer than the Capitol!

She went conscientiously through the main building, reading the informative signs and wondering what life had been like for the guards, whether they had been anything like Curt Blanck, and whether like him they enjoyed hammering on people all the time, or got bored by it after a while.

Well, the camp closed at five P.M., or seventeen as they called it here. Sighing, she headed back toward the gate, only to be deflected by a multilingual sign ordering visitors to stay away from "an unreconstructed Bunker not yet open to the Public. *Eintritt Verboten!*"

Of course she went exploring at once. Beyond some shivering, almost black small pines she found an ugly low building with barred windows. The metal door was locked and she couldn't get inside. Yet she knew at once that things had happened here — really awful things.

Feeling a quiver of excitement, she peered through the bars at cells discolored with the damp, at walls bearing faded names and scratched-in dates and one repeated word, *Warum*? — meaning, Why?

That attracted her; she had often wondered why herself — for instance, why people bothered being alive at all.

She pressed against the wall, listening for echoes, a small elegant figure in a long gray winter coat and little black boots, incongruous in a patch of frozen weeds.

At first she heard only a rattle of tin dishes or cups. Then someone began shouting something over and over, monotonously, all those Germanic questioning words, *Was* and *Warum* and *Wann*, interspersed with heavy blows.

She pulled off her furry cap and swept back her hair and pressed her ear against the cold rough wall. Suddenly a scream sent her reeling backward. She caught herself just short of falling and stood for a full minute clutching both hands to her head.

God! It was like a needle jabbed into the hollow of her ear. For a while

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she was disoriented, stumbling back to the wall and clinging to it to stay upright.

My God, she thought, they must have hurt her. Never, never in all her years of listening to things bygone and best forgotten had Missy picked up a sound with such power.

Slowly her head cleared, though a hammering headache remained. She made her way slowly back to the camp gate, through the dull icy suburban streets, and down to the S-Bahn. She sat through the whole trip home with one hand pressed to her temple, almost missing her stop at Nord-Amerika-Strasse.

At home she went straight to the bedroom and threw herself on the bed, pausing only to remove her muddy, snowy boots. Slowly the pain subsided, and she found herself listening to the echoes of the house. American noises, children arguing, a poor-quality jazz band essaying "Sweet Georgia Brown."

Then she made out more distant echoes of a woman's voice singing a ballad on a scratchy record:

Aus dem stillen Raume
Aus der Erde Grund
Hebt sich wie ein Traume
Dein verliebte Mund —

Something about your beloved mouth rising like a dream out of the Earth, out of silent space...people carried on so much about love, sometimes she felt curious as to what the word meant.

She had no sense of falling asleep, yet woke suddenly, feeling that Roger had come home. No, only 18.10 by their German alarm clock, too early for Roger, who worked at least to nineteen.

But somebody was moving around downstairs.

She got up quietly, opened a drawer in the ugly Quartermaster dresser, and took out her small silvery automatic. One of the greensuiters in the Pentagon had told her it lacked stopping power, so she had bought a box of hollowpoints and she loaded them now, quickly and deftly.

She opened the door and padded out onto the landing in stocking feet. She was at the top step when a heavy footfall made the floor below her

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creak. She raised the pistol and sighted along it, a tremor in her belly, her palms growing sweaty. Then she lowered the pistol and relaxed.

"Well, *you*," she said, as Curt Blanck emerged from the living room and started up the stairs toward her.

HE CAME CAUTIOUSLY, smiling uneasily, his little brown-button eyes flicking nervously from her face to the automatic and back again. And in fact she felt a transient urge to point the gun at him again and order him out of the house.

Yet she didn't. Instead her eyes went vacant, as in the past, seeing what wasn't there. Then focused on him again. She smiled in welcome, and the smile on Curt's meaty lips widened in relief.

"Just go downstairs and have a seat, Honey," her voice chimed almost gaily. "Since you're not a burglar, I'll just go put this away and get some shoes, and I'll be down."

Quickly they got reacquainted. What was he doing in Germany? Hey, Honey, business, just business. One of the I.G. Farben successor companies was negotiating with Curt's company about mutual penetration of the EC and the American marketplaces. The big boys were here, with Curt and some other peons along to run errands for them. After today's meeting he'd driven his rental car over to the grungy old NATO building to find Roger.

"Couldn't find Bubba at first, they got him hidden away in a kind of closet in the cellar. But this little fraulein name of Inga come along and showed me the way, and I got the key from him."

"I bet he was happy to see you," giggled Missy, and Curt chuckled.

They were getting dressed during this exchange; Roger was due home any minute, but there had been time for a quickie on the couch anyway. It had been old Curt all the way, just as she remembered him — wild and rough, with a lot of slapping on the butt. Missy had responded wildly.

"Honey, you ain't been gettin' enough lately," he said in a concerned tone.

"*You're* tellin' *me*!"

They were settled comfortably on the sofa, sipping glasses of Roger's cheap Liebfraumilch when the man of the house came home, looking

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harried. He stopped in the doorway, trying to smile and thinking, Well, well. The two people I love most.

He got himself a glass of wine and sat down on the remaining chair, a hard one.

"If you need a place to stay while you're here," he told Curt, because he thought he ought to, "you're welcome to use the couch."

This caused Missy to splutter into her wine but Curt took it calmly.

"Thanks, Bubba, but the boss wants me close at hand. My company took two whole floors at the Bayerische Hof — twenty-seven thousand bucks a day — and the food's great. I never thought Krauts could cook, but it's damn near as good as New Orleans food. Well, almost."

Missy said, "If you've got any free time, Curt, I'll be glad to show you around."

"I might be able to get free tomorrow afternoon," said Curt thoughtfully. "Gimme your number, I'll call if I can. Hey," he added to Roger. "This okay with you, Bubba?"

"Sure, sure."

"Seein' as I introduced y'all," said Curt and toasted them with his glass.

Curt hadn't changed much. His face was still solid and ruddy, but his image had matured: he wore an Armani suit and a wild tie and his dark hair was now in a fashionable dry cut instead of his old-time TV-minister petrified swirl.

"Your brother's still got eyes like a niggertown dog," Missy told Roger after Curt left in his rented BMW.

Roger grunted. "That's one thing we still agree on."

"Oh, I know we're over," she said as they undressed for bed. "I saw it comin' — "

"Long ago," he finished for her.

"Don't you make fun of my gift," she warned him.

They looked each other in the eyes, steadily, for the first time in a long time.

"Listen," said Roger abruptly, "have you and Curt ever — "

He choked on the word and stopped.

"Scurrewwwed?" she asked. "Well, as a matter of fact, he was my very first lover, if you don't count a few kids at home."

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She shrugged into her nightgown.

"He was rough, too. I never knew it could be like that. People had always treated me so nice up till then. He *hurt*. I can't tell you how I loved that old boy for a while."

Roger started getting dressed again.

"Where you goin'?" she asked.

"Ask your echoes," he said. "Maybe they'll tell you."

And then he was gone — the way they all went sooner or later: the boys at home, and Curt, and now Roger. Curt came back, but for one thing only.

That night Missy lay in bed alone in the dark and listened to sleet strike the double-paned window like drumming fingernails and the only thing she could think of was the unanswerable question, *Warum?*

Next afternoon Curt drove over. He and Missy tore off another piece, this time in her bed, and then went sightseeing.

They did the wonders of Zweibrücken, the Zoo, the Marienkirche and so forth. Then in Curt's car they ventured farther out, discovering and exploring a castle on a mountainside. Curt was predictably fascinated by the dungeon, pointing to a gadget that crushed testicles and telling Missy wryly, "A ball-buster — just like you."

Missy picked up some echoes here and there, but they were dim and indistinct, faded by time, yelling in some German dialect, tinkling harpsichords, the firing of a musket. She thought the people who lived here had tiresome lives.

"Nothin' to do but drink and eat too much and oppress the peasantry," she said. "Just like a bunch of hogs, only they walked on their hind feet."

"You know your trouble, Missy? Every goddamn thing bores you, that's your problem."

"I sense a world I can't quite reach," she told him in a low voice. "Sometimes I think I must be crazy. I hate what people call the real world. I hate it more all the time."

"Including people like me who live here."

"Oh, Curt, that's not what I meant. You belong to this world, I don't, that's all."

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"I figured Rog would be more your speed."

She was silent for so long that Curt turned to stare at her.

"I thought so, too," she said at last in a choking voice, and for an astounded moment he thought she was going to cry.

At home she kissed Curt goodbye and hastened up the walk. Lights were already on inside, and when she opened the front door she heard voices — Roger's and some woman's.

She hung up her coat and started up the stairs, only to confront a pale youngish German woman coming down with an armful of Roger's clothes.

"Who the hell are you?" Missy demanded.

"Inga Traudel," said the woman, pushing past her. "And you are the Missy, hm?"

"Yes, I am the Missy, and this is my house, and what — "

Roger appeared and started down, carrying his luggage. He had two hats on his head, a wool snap brim with a little feather and a Bavarian hat that had been his first and silliest purchase in Germany. He excused himself as he passed Missy by.

Well, there was no use in being touched if you couldn't pick up on what was happening here. Inga was speaking rapid German on the phone. Missy descended the stairs in a dream.

Roger avoided her eyes but Inga returned stare for stare. She had large gray eyes that never seemed to blink, and behind them, Missy picked up what could only have been pity, pity for her.

Missy had never felt so insulted in her life. "You won't be happy with him either," she warned.

"Oh, but I think I will, hm?" said Inga. "I have come to know him about the office, and he is a fine man although a very miserable one."

"You can say that again."

Roger told Missy, "You can get a divorce. I won't contest it. You can keep everything. I don't have much money, but — "

"Money!" spat Missy. "I was never interested in money."

Roger nodded sadly. Of course that was true; Missy was not a worldly person.

There were some further words exchanged, but Missy was hardly aware of what she was saying or what the others were saying. At some point an ancient Mercedes cab pulled up outside and the driver came to the

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door and he and Roger carried the luggage and loose clothing down and put it all in the trunk. As they worked, the poisonous wet chill that precedes snow blew into the room.

Then Roger was waiting quietly by the door in his topcoat. Inga had been consulting Missy about Roger's likes and dislikes, and apparently taking her grunts as serious replies. Now she stepped forward and touched Missy on the cheek.

"You should walk more, hm?" she said. "You are pretty, yet your color is quite unhealthy."

At that Missy came suddenly to life. Uttering a strangled cry, she rushed up the stairs to her room, snatched her automatic from the drawer where she kept it, and pounded down the stairs again, gun in hand.

The front door was shut and she threw it open with a crash and looked out into an empty street. In the bare manicured woods little Christmas-card houses stood around with their lights on, smoke curling from their chimneys. But Roger and Inga were gone.

Slowly she turned back. The echoes of the house began again, louder than before. A throaty voice was singing from an empty corner where a gramophone had stood sixty years ago. It was a crank gramophone and the spring was running down — the most irritating sound Missy could imagine, the song getting slower and slower and the words more and more slurred.

She raised her automatic and fired two shots into the corner, *Bap! Bap!* knocking big flakes of plaster from the wall. But the voice continued indestructibly to the end of the song, *wie ein-s-s-t, Li-ly Mar-lene.*

Next morning Curt phoned to say that he would be leaving in the morning by Lufthansa, and could they get together for a last drink or something? Maybe this afternoon — well, it might be kind of late —

"Come on over," said Missy. "Roger will be out."

"You okay? You sound kind of funny."

"Just a cold," she said, and hung up.

As a matter of fact, it was past sixteen and the snow was falling briskly when Curt's BMW drew up in front of the house. He roared in like a weather-front himself, smoke jetting from his nostrils.

Of course he wanted to tear off a little right there and then, and get the

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hell out. Wham, bam, thank you, ma'am. But Missy had spent last night and today formulating her plans. She had her coat and her little boots on and she was carrying a small leather handbag.

"No, Honey, this is the last time and I want it to be really special," she cooed.

"Oh, oh," said Curt with comic reluctance, remembering perhaps the sort of thing Missy usually had in mind when she said "really special."

"Oh, come on, Honey," she said. "It won't hurt a bit. Really."

When they were settled in the BMW, she added, "That's what you said to me the very first time we scurrewwwed."

"What?"

"'It won't hurt a bit.' That was what you said."

"Really? Did I say that?"

"Yes," said Missy, and gave him a tiny smile.

She wanted to show him the concentration camp. They arrived just half an hour before closing time, and a little apple-cheeked man in the custodian's lodge near the gate looked at them curiously through a frosty window, two lunatics sightseeing in a snowstorm.

Curt was just as bewildered. But he followed Missy gamely, hoping for a little fun at the end of the road, until she turned off the gravel path toward a dark, low building obviously without either light or heat.

"Now wait a minute," he said, but she skipped on ahead and he had to follow. She vanished around the corner of the bunker and the snow swirled after her. Cursing now, he followed and found her leaning against the wall.

"Goddamit, you *are* insane," he began, but she reached out and unbuttoned his overcoat and began to rub him briskly through his trousers. Her tongue was between her teeth like a little pink petal and her eyes were wide open and snowflakes starred her long black lashes.

"Oh please, Honey," she whispered. "Afterwards we'll go to a nice warm place, but first here. Please. I want to."

Curt decided to take it as a challenge.

God, we got a lot of clothes on, he thought, plowing through layers of garments. As he worked he began to get into the spirit of the adventure. There was something bizarre and frenzied about it that he liked, going up against a concentration camp wall in a snowstorm.

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Where is that li'l old thang, anyway? He kissed her fiercely, going into her delicate mouth like a man sucking an oyster.

When he got down to bare skin he picked her up with both hands and rammed her against the stones. He was in a hurry, and if she wasn't ready, tough. He lunged and split her body like a peach, spurting almost in the same instant.

She screamed so loudly in his ear that she almost deafened him. Then came her silvery, hysterical laughter.

"It was me!" she cried. "It was me I heard the other day! It was me! I'm over there now!"

He stepped back, gasping, and also started to laugh. Talk about a quickie! Guinness Book of Records. He began to put his clothes in order, still chuckling at the crazy things that happen, when he chanced to look up and see her aiming that goddamn little automatic of hers at him.

"I want you to know, Curt, that this is the strangest and greatest day of my life," Missy said, and shot him.

Bap! He felt the bullet as a hard slap on the thigh. He turned to run, but his trousers fell down and he tripped over them and fell, gashing his head on a chunk of broken concrete.

Bap! Other leg this time. Hurt like hell, and he struggled up again, desperate to get away. *Bap!* the hollowpoint went through his ribs on the left side and he spun around and fell backward without feeling himself hit the ground.

He wanted, he really wanted, to ask Missy why. His mouth was still working at the question when he saw Missy deliberately raise the pistol and shoot herself through the right temple and fall slowly, cinematically, in a heap. Her body lay there collecting snow, and the rest of her, if there was a rest, faded into night and storm, while the sound of the shot joined her scream and all the other thronging echoes of the camp.

For a few minutes Curt concentrated on the great problem of his life, the problem of swallowing his own blood before it drowned him. But there was no way to stop the tide rising in his punctured lung. He struggled, bucking and gasping, with the salty hot red stuff running out of his nose and mouth and smoking as it hit the outer cold.

Then he too fell quiet, and everything else was quiet, except the snow, rustling as it fell.

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* * *

In going through Missy's effects, Roger discovered in a notebook an address in Toomsuba, MS, for "Venetia Johnson (Aunt Vee)." Missy's checkbook stubs showed small sums sent to V. Johnson over the years.

As far as he knew, no one else in the world had ever given Missy love, or gained hers, for so long a time. When the *Polizei* had finished and the crematory returned her ashes in a cubical box, he mailed it with the biggest check he could afford to Toomsuba.

Inga found the proceeding strange. She told him so one night when they were sitting in front of the fire in her apartment, where they had decided to live.

"I just think she belongs at home," he told her. Inga leaned her head quietly against his shoulder and patted his bony chest. They were still learning about each other, and she told him some stories about her unhappy marriage to a German businessman who was charming and brutal by turns, but always unfaithful. Roger told her some of the things that had happened to him in the days of Missy and Curt.

She heard him out and then said, "Never mind. We will help each other *die Wiederhallen der Vergangenheit zu vergessen.*"

Roger, still struggling with German, said, "What does that mean?"

"To forget the echoes of the past," said Inga. "Hm?" ☙

COMING ATTRACTIONS

NEXT MONTH YOU'LL MEET the Goro, a creature that does not look kindly on having its items taken from it. You'll also meet the lethal Hunters, but the ones who will likely make the biggest impression on you are the quarry in Peter S. Beagle's story of the same name.

We also expect to bring you Sheila Finch's seafaring fantasy "So Good a Day" next month, in which you'll ride along with two of England's finest sailors, albeit an unlikely duo.

In the coming issues we also expect to bring you new stories from Joe Haldeman, Richard Mueller, Robert Reed, and Esther Friesner. Log on to *www.fsfmag.com* or use the reply card in this issue to subscribe and you won't miss any of the fine stories coming soon.

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Ray Vukcevich has contributed a dozen odd stories to our pages, including "Mom's Little Friends," "Whisper," and "Poop." He is the author of one novel, The Man of Maybe Half-a-Dozen Faces, *and his first collection of short stories,* Meet Me in the Moon Room, *was a finalist for the Philip K. Dick Award. In addition to upping the weirdness quotient of our magazine (for which we thank him), Mr. Vukcevich has also published recently in* SciFiction, Witpunk, Rosebud, Lost Pages, The Infinite Matrix *and* Polyphony, *to name a few. He lives in Eugene, Oregon, and says this science fiction story speaks for itself.*

Gas

By Ray Vukcevich

LINDSEY PUT A HAND OVER each of Jack's ears like she was holding a pumpkin and moved in nose to nose to communicate the following information wordlessly.

You're wondering what we're doing here, well, this morning, oh, a little after 9:00, call it 9:15, Connie at the office gave me the tickets and told me how to get here. She said go down the block and around the corner then take a right and go straight for a while.

"But...but...."

Then turn left and keep your eyes peeled for a doorway with stairs just inside and when you spot it, oh look there it is now, go up the stairs and down the hall to your left, no, no, your other left, to the very end, and knock, and wait for the little slot to slam open, and then you say the password.

"We don't know the password!" Jack said.

One sec. Lindsey looked off to one side like she was thinking. Connie told me the password.

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"I can't believe you forgot the password."

I've almost got it. Something about holding your breath and turning blue until you find true love.

"Oh, never mind," a man behind the door said. "Just fork over your tickets."

Lindsey poked the tickets through the little slot in the door.

"Don't hit him in the eyes!" Jack whispered.

The man behind the door laughed like yeah that was going to happen. He opened the door and waited invisible in the darkness for them to enter.

Lindsey took Jack's hand. Come on. It'll be fun!

Meaning the famous flutist Aloysius Mann would be in town for only a few days, and Jack said, "So that should have meant there would be less time we'd have to spend avoiding him," and she said, very funny!

Besides, we're already here.

Why was this so important to her? Jack didn't believe that bit about Connie at the office getting the tickets. There might not even be a Connie at the office. It was like every date lately, Lindsey had been so evasive, nervous sidelong glances, unaccountable giggling, and comments right out of the blue like oh, don't you just love the woodwinds, and oh, wouldn't it be great if we could take in more cultural events, and oh, look, the world famous Aloysius Mann is coming to this funky little uptown club, and oh, I wonder if he'll do Bach? There was a message just under the surface of the way she walked and the way she held her fork when they met for lunch, and the message warned of an obstacle to overcome.

He worried but not too much, because he was absolutely crazy about her.

Maybe the famous Aloysius Mann will play our song, Jack. She waited smiling for him to say, oh yeah, our favorite song! I can't wait. But he wondered if the great man really did toot their song, would the classic cartoon from which Jack knew the song in the first place be playing in the background?

Jack saw white hands pull open a slash in the darkness, some kind of curtain, and the ticket-taker said, "Watch your step on the way down."

The flight of stairs up from the street seemed pointless now, because you had to go down another steep flight of stairs into a bowl below street level. The seats ran down half the bowl to a lighted stage.

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At the top of the stairs, a young blond woman emerged, gleaming grin first, from the gloom and handed each of them a package about as big as a shoe box — some kind of device, metal and maybe rubber, in crinkly clear plastic. "There's still lots of room down front," she said and handed them each a program. "Please wait for instructions before you open anything."

Jack and Lindsey made their way down the stairs. They found seats in the third row. They could have gotten seats right in the middle, but Lindsey said they would have the best view of Aloysius Mann's fancy finger work if they were offset a little to the left. Most of the other listeners must have shared her assessment since the audience was definitely skewed to the left.—

"What is this?" Jack crinkled the clear plastic on his package.

Er...how would I know? Lindsay looked away quickly in a manner that told him she was withholding information, not exactly lying, okay, so she was lying, why mince words? She was lying through her teeth, pulling the wool over his eyes, playing fast and loose with the facts.

The lights blinked, and then went out altogether. There was a long pause, and soon lots of grumbling and shifting about in the seats, but just before everyone panicked and stampeded for the only door, probably trampling to death the young and aged and just plain slow or not feeling so hot today, a little sniffly, we thought maybe a bit of classical music would help, a spot lighted the stage. A moment later a woman dressed from waist to neck in a business suit and from waist to feet in jeans and sneakers, walked to a microphone, tapped it, and spoke. Jack thought she might be the same young woman who had handed him his package at the top of the stairs.

She said, "Tonight we are honored to present Aloysius Mann, who will favor us with selections from his unaccompanied repertoire for the flute."

She paused for a smattering of applause, but she'd misjudged their enthusiasm and there was a painful period of silence before she continued. "You will be happy to know that the apparatus you were issued when you entered the theater has been sanitized for your protection."

Maybe she expected more applause, because she paused again until someone coughed. "Okay," she said. "At this time, please open your packages."

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Many people had already opened their packages. Jack could hear them muttering as they turned the strange black objects around and around in their hands. He had, of course, followed instructions and not opened his package until told to do so. Judging by the sound of simultaneous cellophane ripping and crinkling, a fair number of other people had also followed instructions.

"Including you. Surprise, surprise," he told Lindsey.

Oh, please, she replied with a look.

The apparatus turned out to be a classic gas mask — black and rubbery with clear plastic insect eyes and pig snout. Adjustable head straps.

"Let's suit up, then." The woman had a gas mask, too, and she was going to show them how to use it. "Adjust your straps like this," she said. "Then put the mask to your face and secure it like this." Her voice became muffled. "Now everyone turn to your right and make sure your neighbor's head straps are secure."

Lindsey was to his left, so it was a little like a clandestine affair (he supposed) when he turned to his right and closely examined the back of the head and neck of the woman who had gotten her gas mask strap snagged on her ponytail. Jack reached forward and adjusted it and felt her tremble at his touch and said, "There! That's better."

"What about the guys at the end of the rows?" someone shouted.

"I was getting to that," the woman said. "Now turn to your left and check your other neighbor's straps. This is what we call 'double redundancy' and is just one more thing we do for your safety."

"Double?"

Oh, never mind, Jack. The show's about to start.

The woman said, "So, now I give you Aloysius Mann!" She started the applause herself and backed off the stage to the left as a stagehand hurried in from the right with a music stand. He put it down in the center of the stage and took the microphone with him as he left.

Everything went black.

Then the spotlight came on again, and the famous flute player was already there by the music stand. He looked to be in his early seventies. Bald with clouds of gray above his ears. Wrinkled brown suit. Silver flute. No gas mask.

He looked out at them and smiled. He lifted his instrument and began.

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The opening was clear and pure and complex. Jack checked his program. It wasn't easy to see it through the plastic lenses of his gas mask, but he was able to determine Mann was playing Bach's "Partita in A minor."

"Allemande," he whispered to Lindsey.

"Shush," someone said.

Hey, wait a minute. What was that at the end of the flute?

Yes, there it was again — a puff of green gas from the end of the flute.

Definitely green gas, like smoke, and now as the music soared, the gas billowed from the end of the flute until it wasn't easy to see the maestro.

"What the hell," Jack said.

Someone tapped him on the shoulder. "Please, don't talk."

Lindsey took his hand and communicated with little taps and squeezes thusly.

It's such a sad story. Everyone realized very early that Aloysius was a prodigy. It was easy to see the boy could be one of the great musicians of all time. His family was supportive and allowed him time for practice and funds for the best schools. He was one of the youngest flutists in a prestigious school in Europe when he was not yet nine. Contests won. Impressive venues. Everything was coming up roses for young Aloysius Mann.

But then in his early teens, his breath went bad and even a little visible. He used sprays and chewed breath mints, but nothing helped much. He became a target for a good deal of mean-spirited teasing. He put his head down and pushed on, and the music he made was phenomenal.

But by the time he turned twenty-five, he could no longer appear in public. It was the smell, not the sound, that drove his audience from the theaters, tears running down their faces and curses on their lips.

Had it not been for recorded music, he might have been a goner.

"It looks like he's doing okay now," Jack whispered.

Indignant throat clearing from the rear. Jack glanced back to see the black snout and glaring eyes of the man or woman behind him. He shrugged and smiled, but his smile was wasted in his own mask.

Aloysius Mann hit the high A of the Allemande, and the green gas rolled from the end of his flute like smoke from an oil fire.

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People coughed at the sight of it.

By the time he hit the high A again on the repeat, it was easy to believe you might not be on Earth anymore.

"Venus," Jack said.

Too hot, these days. Maybe in the fifties when it rained all of the time. Instead, we might imagine we're on a planet some twenty-three light-years from Earth with a similar atmosphere if you discount the gas produced by its inhabitants.

"What makes you say that?"

Before he could be tapped and told to shut up again, the pause between the movements ended, and Aloysius Mann stepped into the Corrente.

It turns out, Lindsey continued, that the affliction came upon him slowly. By his forties, he could not be in the same room with people at all even when he was not producing the very considerable breath necessary for the flute. In fact, he could not get closer than about ten feet even outside. Nevertheless, with the judicious use of mouthwashes, breath sprays and mints, and room deodorizers, he managed to live a somewhat ordinary life.

Lately, though, record sales have diminished, and since he cannot really take on students, he must resort to performances like this. Lindsey looked at Jack like she wanted him to say something, but what could he say to such a story? He looked to his right, but he couldn't see the woman with the ponytail.

You could have cut the green air with a sword. Jack was glad to be holding onto Lindsey's hand. Otherwise he would be alone with nothing but a brighter glow in the green where the flutist must be as he produced music that almost made it all worthwhile. Jack felt his body melt away until he was all ears and one hand holding onto Lindsey in the green clouds.

When the music stopped, she let go of his hand, and he experienced a moment of absolute panic. He was alone, lost in a green gas world of silence forever. He might have been swimming furiously, struggling, but he couldn't feel his arms and legs. He might have made a sound. Some kind of undignified squeak.

But then he found her again, and she said, it's okay, it's okay, the music is about to start again, and it did.

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The Sarabande, slow, smooth and amazing, and Jack settled into it like a gulp of air on surfacing while drowning or maybe coming back into the sunshine from a gloomy forest or like none of those things, silly, she said and said, I've got a confession to make.

"Yes?"

Aloysius Mann is my grandfather.

"What?"

And he's not really a man.

"Your grandfather is a woman?"

No, I should have said he's not human. Sorry for the sexist language.

She leaned in close and as her face came out of the green gas, he could see she wasn't wearing her gas mask. He wants to meet you. That's what this is really all about.

"And this green gas routine will happen to you, too, as you approach your thirties? How come I haven't noticed it yet?"

Yes, she said, yes it will. And you will.

"And you're from some place that isn't Venus in the fifties?"

That's right, and when it was clear that we would never leave this planet again, we had to change in order to survive. We made certain modifications so we could blend in, but there was only so much we could do, and it wasn't entirely successful. When we did as much as we could to ourselves, we were down to just Grandpa and me as a newly modified baby. Everyone else had died. We're the last of our kind, and Grandpa decided he simply could not die and leave me all alone, so he decided to change you people, too. Or at least one of you. For me.

"You mean...?"

That's right, Jack, Grandpa beamed certain modifications at your parents even before you were conceived and later before you were even born, he did some more beaming.

"You mean...?"

That's right, Jack. We made you what you are, but we couldn't tell if it would really work until now.

Aloysius Mann was deep into the Bourrée Angloise now.

"How will we know if it worked?"

You must take off your mask, Jack.

"What will happen?"

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Nothing. Or something wonderful. Or you'll throw up, and we'll have to go our separate ways.

She squeezed his hand. I'm so afraid, Jack.

She sang a note that so perfectly matched her grandfather's flute that the grumblers hidden in the green gas behind them must surely believe the voice to be part of this unusual performance, and as she sang the note, a tendril of purple gas drifted from her lips, first faintly then as vigorously as disturbed vipers and twisted through the green toward Jack. I've arrived, Jack.

Smell me.

Jack let go of her hand and reached up to pull off his mask. He hesitated for only a moment to set his resolve. No matter what she smelled like, no matter how awful her grandfather's gas was, he would not throw up. He would smile and smile and smile and breathe through his mouth for the rest of his life if it meant not losing her.

All he could see was her face floating in the green gas, a small sad smile, and the purple tendrils drifting from her lips. He pulled off his mask.

He took a tentative whiff. Not so bad. Wouldn't you say? A little cheesy maybe. And somehow musical in a surefooted manner. He could get used to this — like sleeping next door to someone snoring.

Jack's eyes were watering.

How are you? she asked.

I'm fine, he said. I think I'm fine.

He rubbed the tears from his eyes and filled his lungs and felt his stomach lurch. He smiled at her, but his smile was tight, and she moved in until their noses touched.

Yes, I'm fine, he said.

He put his arms around her and felt her tremble. He kissed her neck, her cheek, closed each eye with a kiss, worried he was beating around the bush, kissed her nose, her lips, drew deeply her purple gas into himself.

He yelped and pulled away and the sound he made was low and rich and Aloysius Mann answered at once with a run of high notes ending in a spectacular trill.

Yes, while her grandfather's gas might not be so easy to take, this was wonderful. He swooped back down before her disappointed frown had

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even gotten properly started and kissed her again. Rolling hills of yellow wild flowers rushed together to meet her waves of purple blossoms sweeping across the face of the Earth.

Her modifications were absolutely perfect. She was made for him.

But what about his modifications? Had he been properly made for her? What if she were choking back bile and this kiss was for her nothing like it was for him? What if his own biological tweaks had failed? He pulled away a little and blew a canary yellow gas ring, and she laughed a laugh of such unqualified joy, and they came together again, and she filled his head and body. He said marry me, Lindsey, and she said yes, oh, yes, and we'll make babies, and he said, yes, wonderful, fantastic, and she said our babies will take over the world and turn it into someplace that isn't like Venus in the fifties, and he said someday I'll be the grandpa, but not too soon, she cautioned, and we'll get a little house, he said, and she said with a yard where we can grow flowers.

We were made for each other.

There was wild applause. It was probably for Aloysius Mann, since he had finished the partita, but they chose to think it was for them. They snuggled together as close as they could get in the theater seats to hear Grandpa play his flute. Later they would go backstage and tell him the good news.

They allowed themselves to become lost in the music, sometimes slicing the green air with a few purple and yellow notes of their own, but mostly listening and looking at one another, and at one point, her grandfather really did play their favorite song, and Jack still couldn't identify it apart from the classic cartoon, but he didn't mention that. Some things are better left unsaid.

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FILMS

LUCIUS SHEPARD

RETURN OF THE KING

THOUGH most prominent fantasy and science fiction movies typically cost upward of a hundred million dollars to make, the genre has always seemed best served by films unencumbered by huge budgets. Many of these "little" films have brought a fresh sensibility to their subjects, movies such as *The Quiet Earth*, *Donnie Darko*, and Jean-Luc Godard's noirish satire, *Alphaville*, a movie whose worth is something about which few agree, and yet it is usually compared, whether favorably or negatively, to pictures made decades after it was shot, thus testifying to the fact that it presaged both cyberpunk and the cinematic legacy of Philip K. Dick, while simultaneously glancing back at the work of Huxley and Orwell. *Alphaville* had such a low budget, its special effects were handled by means of a voiceover—secret agent Lemmy Caution narrates an interstellar voyage as he drives his Citroën across the Seine, and, because of the film's metaphorical density, we are more than tempted to disbelieve our eyes and accept what he says as true, that we are crossing the galaxies rather than a stretch of dirty water and that the lights in the sky are not the lights of a bridge but astronomical objects.

Not all low-budget genre pictures, of course, either aim or reach so high. Even more central to the genre tradition are movies like those directed by John Carpenter and his apparent lineal successor, David Twohy *(Pitch Black, The Arrival, Below)*. I would argue that apart from a smattering of films such as *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Star Wars*, and Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, not only the most significant films, but the most

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entertaining films set within the genre limits have been B-pictures[1]... and I intend "entertaining" in both the sense of well-crafted stories and just plain fun. Time and again we've seen that budget constrictions have little to do with the quality of the product, with big budgets encouraging bloating more than they enhance production values.

"Big budget" is not a term that applies to *Bubba Ho-Tep*, an indie genre picture that passed though the theaters as quickly as Einstein through kindergarten. Director Don Coscarelli, the man responsible (perhaps "culpable" might be a more suitable word choice) for the *Phantasm* series, has made a B-picture that falls into the category of just plain fun and will almost surely develop something of a following on DVD due to the cultish nature of its materials and the cult status of its lead actor, Bruce Campbell. Based on a story by Joe Lansdale (an attractive book, by the way, containing both the story and screenplay, along with stills from the movie, is available from Night Shade Books), *Bubba Ho-Tep* poses the notion that Elvis Presley (Campbell) did not die in a bathroom at Graceland, but lived on into his seventies and is now experiencing a kind of decaying pre-death in a seedy, abusively neglectful East Texas nursing home. Through flashbacks and the King's voiceover (as effective a device to create suspension of belief as the voiceover in *Alphaville*), we learn that years before, having grown weary of fame, the real Elvis traded places with the world's best Elvis imitator. The two men wrote a contract establishing that the real Elvis could reclaim his rightful status whenever he wished, but the contract was destroyed when a barbecue grill exploded and blew up the imposter's trailer (into which the real Elvis had moved). After his replacement's highly publicized and ignominious death, Elvis makes his way through the world, not altogether unhappily, earning a livelihood by imitating himself until he breaks his hip in a fall from the stage. Now, afflicted with a penile cancer and forced to get about on a walker, he has given up on life. Paunchy, his trademark sideburns and pompadour gone gray, he passes his days limping about the halls of the nursing home, clad in robe and pajamas, and watching his old movies on a black-and-white TV. The other residents of the home are equally deracinated, abandoned by their families, living joylessly and

[1] I use 'B-movie' not in its most specific sense, but for want of a better term to denote low-budget entertainments.

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without hope. Included among their number is one John F. Kennedy (Ossie Davis), who claims to be the former President of the United States transformed into an Afro-American by means of surgery and skin dye, this at the behest of his mortal enemy, Lyndon Baines Johnson. It seems that Elvis does not entirely believe the old man is JFK, but he treats him with the respect due a President (that due a good one, at any rate), and this serves to reinforce the sweetness of the relationship that develops between the two men.

After several of the residents die under mysterious circumstances, and after Elvis himself is attacked by a flying scarab beetle the size of a small dog, he begins to be reenergized by the awareness that some terrible menace is afoot in the nursing home. He joins forces with JFK and learns from him that an ancient Egyptian mummy is loose in the area. Through a succession of telepathic visions and some doddering detective work, Elvis discovers that the mummy was stolen from a traveling exhibition of Egyptian artifacts by a couple of good ol' boys. While making their escape, the good ol' boys ran their vehicle off the road during a heavy downpour and into the river that flows past the nursing home. They died in the crash, but the mummy lived, and since that time it has survived by making night raids on the nursing home, deriving sustenance by sucking the souls out of the occupants. For some reason glossed over by the movie, perhaps as a byproduct of the influence of the digested souls of the good ol' boys, the mummy appears dressed in cowboy hat and boots and writes hieroglyphic graffiti in the bathroom stalls whereon he voids himself of soul-residue — thus, Bubba Ho-tep.

Having read this far, it should be clear that I am not talking about a straight horror flick here. "Gonzo" is a modifier that has been applied to much of Lansdale's fantasy/horror work, and it certainly applies to *Bubba Ho-tep*. The movie is more farcical than suspenseful, more comic than dramatic in its pretensions. What horror element there is lies not so much with its improbable bogeyman as with its depiction of the nursing home as a wastebasket for living human remains. Yet while the script is threadbare in patches, and at times the budget (or lack thereof) shows, especially in the realization of the mummy, *Bubba Ho-tep* is nonetheless successful in what it attempts, and this is chiefly due to Bruce Campbell.

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Campbell is best known for his recurring role as the wise-cracking, cartoonishly post-modern hero, Ash, in Sam Raimi's *Evil Dead* movies, and gained some mainstream exposure as the star of the short-lived TV steampunk western series, *Brisco County, Jr.*, roles that displayed his considerable comedic skills but provided him with no opportunity to demonstrate that he had range. Folks, he's got range. In *Bubba Ho-tep*, his "aging" of Elvis's various mannerisms is wonderfully managed, particularly his hilarious take on the King's hillbilly kung fu moves; but instead of delivering a mere impression of the septuagenarian Elvis, still sporting big hair and wraparound glasses, he gives us a nicely observed portrait of a man who, though reduced by age and disappointment, is possessed by a shadow of the macho self-parodying persona that he adopted along his road to fame. It clings to him like a ghostly cape, even as he stands in the front yard of the nursing home, leaning on his walker, craning his neck to see off along the street. He seems himself not to know exactly how much of the persona was a put-on, but it is this persona that he must readopt in order to function as a man once again. At the end of the film, like Batman slipping into his costume, Elvis dons a white leather rhinestone-studded jumpsuit and cape, fully stepping into his old role preparatory to a final battle with the mummy; yet it was unnecessary for Coscarelli to incorporate that detail into his script, because Campbell has already achieved the effect by means of his actor's craft. As Elvis seeks out information about the mummy, Campbell shows us a man reclaiming his lost dignity and pride. He encourages us to think of Elvis Presley in a more complicated way than we usually might — as a man of parts, someone who may have become lost in the Chinese boxes he constructed to sustain his personality against the stresses of fame — and he succeeds with a surprising degree of subtlety in illuminating the process of an individual who is trying to relearn how to play himself. In the midst of all the over-the-top situations and Hee-Hawish redneck foliage and deep fried dialogue ("I felt my pecker flutter once, like a pigeon having a heart attack..."), Campbell's performance is unexpectedly moving and authentic in feeling, imbuing the absurd plot with a passion and substance it would not otherwise have had.

Coscarelli, whose previous

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directorial efforts have displayed little concern for character, instills the movie with a leisurely pace that reflects the dreadful slowness of life at the nursing home and gives Campbell and Davis room to develop their roles. Some of his work with the movie's ultra-low budget special effects is also worth mentioning. That dog-sized scarab beetle, for instance. When it first appears, you're expecting to catch sight of a wind-up key somewhere on its body; but by the time Elvis has finished with it, thanks to Coscarelli's camera, to an expertise doubtless gained from photographing the flying killer spheres in the *Phantasm* flicks, this ludicrous prop has generated a suitable measure of menace. But Coscarelli's best move clearly was casting Bruce Campbell as his lead and doing whatever he did — whether reining him in or giving him his head — to extract this performance. Was it a fluke? The result of the director's sleight-of-hand? Or has there always been a gifted actor trapped inside Bruce Campbell and waiting to get out? At the end of the credits there's a tag that appears to promise a sequel. If Coscarelli manages to get it made, despite my loathing for the very concept of sequels, I'll stand in line to see if he and Campbell can do it again, because *Bubba Ho-tep* has no CGI monsters, no Brads, no Toms, no Jennifers, no refugees from *Dawson's Creek* or *Roswell* desirous of being real live actors, nothing but an outrageous story and a well-drawn main character, and.... Well, all I've got to say about that is, "Thank you, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you very much."

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"The Martian Child," David Gerrold's first appearance in F&SF, is making its way towards the big screen — it's expected to go into production Real Soon Now. Meantime, his latest novel, Blood and Fire *(the third Star Wolf novel) just came out and Mr. Gerrold is working steadily on a new Chtorr novel. For more details, or just to catch up on The Daily Blog, check out* www.gerrold.com. *If you want to get caught up in a memorable story, keep reading this page —*

Dancer in the Dark

By David Gerrold

WHEN MA FINALLY DIED, they said they didn't have a place for me and it wasn't safe in the city anymore, so they decided it would be best to send me somewhere west where I could live on a farm. They said I would like it. Hard work and sunshine. And I'd get over Ma's death in no time. You'll see. They said.

They put me on a train with a whole bunch of other tight-faced people and went away. The train sat in the station for half a day, all of us waiting scared, before it finally chugged out. It was cold and shivery in the car, and there wasn't much to eat. You could get a drink from the faucet, but the water tasted funny.

Out the window, there was a lot of smoke, and where there wasn't smoke, there was burnt-out buildings, some old, and some still smoldering. I never been on a train before, I thought they went faster than this, but no, this was all stop-and-go, mostly stopping and waiting. And when we did go, we went slow, like the driver was being careful to watch the tracks to make sure they was still there. Once we went real slow through a corridor of burning buildings.

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I was stuck way in the back behind a family, sort of, with a couple of older sisters and a lot of young-uns, except they weren't a real family because they wasn't related. They was just traveling together, and the older sisters weren't sisters at all, they was just supposed to keep the little-uns together. The kids all stunk real bad, they didn't have any clean clothes, and they'd pissed and crapped themselves, more than once. And they cried a lot, trying to keep warm. So I just turned to the window and stared out at whatever there was to see, which wasn't very much because once we got away from the big towns, the dark was spread real thick in a lot of places.

Mostly the dark looked like black fuzziness floating in the air. I'd never been inside the dark, but I heard stories. Everybody heard stories. It's like being shoved inside a thick blanket, you can't see, you can't hear, you can't breathe, and you just stumble around blind. It has something to do with the dark making it hard for things to move, like light or air or blood through your veins. You lay down a couple miles of dark around something and nobody can get through, no matter how much tinfoil they're wearing on their head.

Somebody else said that the whole country was sectioned off now. Dark everywhere. The trains ran through special corridors with walls of dark on each side, just enough room for the tracks and nothing else. You could maybe jump off the train, it wasn't going very fast, but so what? You couldn't get through the walls of dark, you couldn't go anywhere except follow the tracks. So you might as well stay on the train.

Sometime in the middle of the second night, we got to our first stop and they took some of the people off. There was all kinds of dark here, all around everything, even above so we couldn't even look up and see the stars. We didn't know where we were. Even though everybody was real tired, they woke us all up while all these men in different uniforms came marching through. They looked like soldiers from five or six different armies. They pointed at people in their seats. You, you, not you, not you, yes, yes, no, no, and so on. Another man in a different kind of uniform, I think he was the train conductor, came running after them, shouting about how they couldn't just take only the workers, they had to take a balanced cross-section, otherwise it wasn't fair.

I was hoping they'd take me, I wanted off the train real bad, I didn't

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care where we were. I even asked one of the soldier-men to pick me, but he shook his head and said I was too skinny. I tried asking a couple of the others, but they ignored me, so I slumped back down and pulled my blanket up and tried to go back to sleep. There wasn't nothing else to do. I was hungry and cold and stinky and not feeling too good inside. But at least there was some empty seats now and if you had one next to you, you could stretch out.

We had two more stops the next day, one just before noon, and the other late in the afternoon. Each time, another bunch of soldiers came through and took off some more people. After the last stop, there was almost nobody left on the train so they made us all move to the last car. They didn't say why. But probly because it was easier to watch us all in one place.

When they woke us up again, it was still dark. Darkfield dark. I couldn't tell what time it was, somebody said it was 3:30 in the morning. They made us gather up all our things, I didn't have much to gather, and then they herded us off the train and into a fluorescent station. The light hurt my eyes and the room smelled real strong of that disinfectant they use everywhere now. There was a red line across the room and we weren't allowed to cross it. On the other side, there was a line of grumpy-looking people, farmers and townsfolk. I guess they didn't like getting out of bed at this hour either. They looked us up and down like we were something bad-smelling. I guess we were. Every so often, I sort of got a whiff of myself. I felt dirty and itchy, and I wanted a bath or even a shower. My feet hurt and I was shivering in my blanket.

The guy who looked like the conductor read a statement to the folks on the other side of the line, something about what they was agreeing to and how they had to treat us, stuff like that. They all looked bored, like they'd heard it all before. Then he read another statement to us on this side of the line, about our rights and stuff and how we didn't have to go if we didn't want to, but we couldn't refuse either. Which didn't make any sense.

And then they started letting people pick us. A big farmer pointed at one of the skinny girls and asked her if she could cook and clean. She nodded, and he grunted and said, "Okay, come along," and she picked up her little suitcase and followed him. There was a sad-looking man and

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woman, they looked at the two littlest children and whispered together for a while, and then crossed the line and picked them up and left real quick, like they feared someone wouldn't let them take the babies.

It went like that for a while, until there weren't many of us left. There was this hard-looking woman standing across from me. She looked like she'd been baked in the Sun until all the juice had been burned out of her and all that was left was this dry crunchy thing. She was looking at me like she couldn't make up her mind if I was worth the trouble. Finally, she said, "Boy? Are you gonna work, or you just gonna eat?"

"I can work," I said.

She walked over to the conductor and they talked together for a bit. He shook his head a lot. I got the feeling that I wasn't the first kid she'd picked out. And maybe the other one didn't work out. But finally, whatever, she came back and pointed at me and said, "Get your things." And that was it. I followed her out through the big double doors to a dirty parking lot surrounded by dark. A couple of tall light poles showed a few cars and the building we'd come out of and not much more than that.

"You got a name?"

"Folks call me Em."

"Em?"

"Yeah."

"Short for Emmett?" she asked.

"Em for Michael."

"Michael, yes. That's better than Em. You can call me Miz."

"Yes, Miz."

She pointed toward a beat-up old flatbed truck. She tossed my duffel into the back. I started to climb up after it, but she opened the door for me and said, "Get in."

We drove west on a road that was lined with dark. There might have been stars above, I couldn't tell. We had headlights, but they was mostly useless. They picked out the line of the road and that was all. She didn't say much and I didn't feel like talking either. I was too cold. I bunched up part of my blanket like a pillow and tried to rest my head against the window. It was worse than the train. We must have driven two hours. By the time we got where we were going, there was a feeling of light behind us. Hard to tell though, with all the dark.

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Then there was a hole in the dark and she turned right and then left and then right again, and then we came out onto a big gray slope leading up to an old gray house. Behind it there was a dirty barn that had once been red, real tired-looking and leaning to one side, like it wanted to lie down, like if you gave it a good hard push, the whole thing would collapse, except there were a bunch of boards jammed in at an angle, propping it up so it couldn't. The old woman pointed. "You'll sleep in there. There's straw for a bed, and some old horse blankets. You can wash in the horse trough. Don't bother the cows. I start milking at six. I want you up and mucking out the stalls every morning. As soon as the cows are turned out. There's a couple barrels of disinfectant. You keep those stalls clean, you hear? As clean as you want your own bed — or your dinner plate. It's almost six now, so wash yourself up, you stink like a pig. Then get started. After milking, I'll bring you a plate. Don't want you in the house, boy. Lord knows what you're carrying."

"Yes, ma'am."

She stopped the car in front of the house, yanked on the parking brake real hard, like she was angry. "You like eggs? You ever had fresh eggs? Don't look like it. You're thinner than a ghost. When was the last time you ate?"

"Day before yesterday. I think. On the train, they gave us some leather to chew on."

"Damn fools. That's no way to treat anyone. Even deepies."

"Deepies?"

"Displaced Persons. DP's."

"Oh." Remembered my manners. "Thank you for takin' me in. I'll work real hard for you, ma'am."

She grunted. "Damn right you will. No free meals out here. Well, don't just sit there. We got work to do."

After milking and mucking, we pulled down a couple of bales of hay from the loft and broke them open for the cows. There was only three cows and they looked kinda sickly, but I don't know much about cows, so they coulda been fine too. But they walked real slow and stupid, like some of the people I'd seen in the city, the sick ones that they'd herd away every so often. But maybe that's how cows are. One of them looked at me for a bit, but she didn't look dangerous or anything, I didn't think you could make friends with a cow, so I just kept on shoveling cowshit.

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Then there was the chickens, there was too many to count, they kept moving around all the time, bobbing their ugly little heads and clucking like old ladies. Miz poured out some corn for them and they all came cackling up. They was funny to watch. Later, after they'd finished the corn, they wandered around the fenced-in part of the yard, scratching for bugs and worms.

The biggest part of my job was feeding the refiner. This was three or four big metal tanks in a row, all piped together like a connected series of garbage disposals. I had to dump all the garbage into it every day, and everything else that wasn't nailed down — old corn stalks, dirty straw, stinkweeds, whatever. I had to scrape up the chicken guano and dump it in, plus wheelbarrow loads of cow manure and pig shit. Miz had indoor plumbing, but we both had to use the outhouse, because it pumped right into the refiner too. The methane that came off the top was piped around to fuel the stove at the bottom. The refiner was a big stinky stew pot, simmering and bubbling, sometimes grinding and chewing. But I didn't mind working the refiner, except for the smell. It was the only time I was really warm.

At the far end, out came oil. Enough for the truck, enough for the water heater, enough to power the refiner for another few days. Sometimes there was even enough to sell the extra in town. What didn't get turned into oil came out as mulch. And a scattering of metal bits and rock. The metal bits we saved for town. I had to check the refiner when I got up, twice during the day, and again before hitting the straw. Miz said if we had two more pigs, we'd be fat. But we didn't have enough corn to feed any more pigs. We were already too close to the bone, she said.

Out back of the house, Miz had a garden for vegetables, mostly stuff like tomatoes and potatoes and cucumbers and things like that. Some pumpkins and watermelons too. She also had a big patch of corn. Not a whole field, but enough to feed us and the chickens and even some for the cows. Like everything else, though, the corn had a sickly look. "Hard to grow things when there isn't enough light for them. Not good for plants, not good for people either. Still, it's better'n dyin'." She sniffed. "One good thing about the dark, though. We don't get as many rabbits or foxes sneakin' in. They don't like the dark anymore than anyone else. But you still have to watch out for burrows, because sometimes they will dig

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under. Saturdays, we go to town and get whatever supplies they still got. Sometimes there's a movie, but don't be expectin' it. Sundays, we go to Meeting. When we get back from Meeting, you can have time by yourself. But you stay outta trouble. Stay away from the dark. Don't go darksniffin' like the last damnfool I had out here. And no, I ain't sayin' nothin' about that. And don't you go askin' no questions neither, if you're smart."

But I didn't have to ask no questions. There was plenty enough people willin' to tell me everthin' they knew. First time we went to town, while I was loadin' sacks of chemical fertilizer into the back of the truck. Town wasn't much, just a scattering of old buildings on one side of the old highway, like someone just dropped them there any which way. Surrounded by dark, of course. Only way in or out is through the corridors, that's three roads and the train tracks. So there's not a lot to see. Funny lookin' kid with a broken tooth comes up and says, "You Miz's new boy?"

"Guess so."

"You wanna be real careful. Not like Doey. She tell you what happened to him?"

"I know what I need to know," I said, pretending to ignore him.

"No, you don't. You're a city boy. You don't know shit."

"I know enough to keep my nose outa other folks' business." I hefted the last sack in.

"You just stay out in the barn, boy, you know what's good for you. Come winter, she's gonna want you to come in and warm her bed, you'll see. Keep yourself bad-smellin', that's what Doey did. Till he ran away — ran into the dark, he did."

Miz came out of the feed store then, saw the kid and her face got real fierce. He saw her the same time and skittered off like the rat he was. Miz came up to me and stared at me hard. "What'd that boy say?"

Already knew better than to lie. Miz wasn't easy even on the best of days. I just sorta shrugged. "He said you had another boy named Doey. He ran away."

"That all he said?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She sniffed like she didn't believe me, but she didn't push it. "Well, you stay away from that J.D. boy. He's bad news. That whole family is. Now get to work. Help me load all this."

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Miz explained that the train had come through again, so today was a good day. Some of the stores had new things on the shelves, even some new magazines in the racks. Miz bought a couple, bought one for me too. "Readin' is good for you, as long as you don't do too much of it. Puts funny ideas into your head. You start daydreamin', you won't get your chores done."

She bought me some new jeans and a couple of work shirts, a pair of boots and some thick socks. For herself, she stocked up on spices; she was starting to run low, she even bought a bottle of vanilla. "Might try makin' a cake or something. When was the last time you had cake?"

"Had a birthday party once, when I was little. My ma bought a cake."

"Store-bought cake? Ain't the same. You get your chores done, I'll make you a cake so good you'll think you died and went to heaven."

Second time I heard about Doey was the next day at Meeting.

Meeting was a ways off, I couldn't tell how far, but we were driving for at least an hour, maybe more, down a long corridor of dark, all twisty, up and down, with a couple of sharp turnoffs into passages that felt even darker. When we got there, we weren't really anywhere, just a wide open space with an old school-looking building in the center of a hard-dirt clearing. The dark around was cut by seven different openings, but one of them was walled off with tall orange cones and Miz told me to stay well away from that one. I didn't ask why, she wouldn't have said anyway.

Inside, the room was gloomy, lit by kerosene lamps. No generator here. But it was warmer than outside and it was a chance to sit quiet-like and almost doze. It was kind of like church too, so you had to keep your eyes open. There were these old ladies up top all singin' real faraway and soft like they was a choir of angels or something. The music was real old-fashioned, but it wasn't too painful.

Then the mayor got up and talked about living the hard life and staying clean and trusting God and following the rules because the reason that things had gotten so bad was that so many people had stopped following the rules, and we'd all made a big mess of things, so now we had to do penance for a thousand years or more while we tried to put things back together the best we could, but the only way to do that was to stay away from the dark and follow the rules. He went on and on like that for a long time. Then there was some discussion of chores that had to be done

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in the coming days, including putting down some new dark lines just to the west. He asked for volunteers for a work crew.

After Meeting, some folks climbed back into their trucks and drove off right away. But most folks gathered for tea and little sandwiches and even a cake. It looked real pretty. And everybody stood around in their clean clothes and talked polite and pretended everything was going fine, which it wasn't, but nobody would say so, because nobody wanted to be accused of doing the devil's talk. But you could see it in their faces, all hard and narrow and pinched. The sandwiches and cake disappeared fast. Some of these folks was hungry. Miz stopped me, wouldn't let me go to the table. She whispered, "You let that food be, son. It's not for us. It's for them that hasn't any. We have food at home. Some of these folks, this is their only meal today." So I went outside and stood around by the cars with the other men, just stood and listened.

"Hey you, new boy!" One of the men turned around and pointed to me. A big man. Beard. Overalls. A broken eye.

"Yeah?" I answered the good eye.

"You coming out with us, tomorrow? Help lay some dark lines?"

I shrugged. "Dunno. Whatever Miz says."

"Miz'll say yes. If I ask her. Can I trust you to work? Not stand around?"

"I can work."

"You have to promise to stay away from the bright. And keep your glasses on. And don't take off your silver. That's how we lost the other one. Whatsisname. Doey. You heard about that?" He peered at me.

Didn't answer, just sorta shrugged again. Safest way. Better to have them think I'm stupid than wrong. You can get killed being wrong. That's a city lesson. But it might be true out here in the dark lands as well.

"He don't know shit," said someone else. "Just another dumb city boy."

"He can carry. I'll talk to Miz. We need the hands. Besides, if we lose him, nobody'll care. Not even Miz. She'll just hook another one off the train."

And that was how it was decided that I should work on the dark team one or two days a week. I think Miz was glad to not have me around so much. There wasn't enough work to keep me busy every day. Or maybe

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she was just glad not to have to feed me. Sometimes the food was a little thin, even at her place. There just wasn't enough light. Somebody said that made everybody sad all the time. Depressed, he said. And then someone else told him to shut up. That was the devil's talk. Next he'd be complaining about the dark lines and the lines were the only things keeping them out. And then somebody said, "Not in front of *him*," meaning me, and that was the end of that conversation.

A few days later, an old truck pulled up in front of the house and a couple of workmen I didn't know got out and paid their respects to Miz. She handed them a paper bag with a bit of lunch in it, nowhere near enough to feed one hungry man, let alone three, but it was all she could spare. I climbed into the back of the pickup and made myself comfortable among the tools and wires.

We drove for half an hour, through the town, up the old highway for a while, and then off to the right where the corridor ended in orange cones. The workmen got out then and we all put on heavy black goggles and breathing masks and shiny silver capes and heavy work gloves. Then we drove on. The driver steered the truck carefully around the cones and up the passage to where the dark lines simply stopped. Beyond the lines, the ground rolled away like a rumpled gray bedsheet. There were already two other trucks here and five other men. One of them had a map rolled out on the hood of his truck and he was drawing lines with a crayon.

When nobody was looking, I lifted my goggles just a bit and snuck a peek at the brightlands. Immediately, I wished I hadn't. It knocked me backward. It was like being slapped in the face with a red-hot splash. I stumbled into the side of the truck, I fumbled the glasses back into place. My eyes were watering, I held them shut tight and tried to wipe at them without being blinded again. I felt really stupid, then I heard the men laughing at me and I got angry. They could have warned me. But then, one of them, a big soft guy everybody called Tallow, came up and put a black cloth over my head. He reached under the hood, pushed my goggles back, and mopped my face with a damp rag. It smelled faintly of disinfectant. He said quietly, "Don't take it bad. You only done what everybody else here did their first time too. We was all watching you. You got it over with quick. Now that you've seen a little bit of what's out there, you know what we all got to be careful about. Your eyes will stop hurting in a bit."

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"You looked too, your first time?"

"Yep. Worse than you. I wasn't much older than you neither. I went out with my cousins, they said it wasn't nothing to be afraid of, you just take off the gloomies and look, see? So I did. That was real stupid. I stepped in it as deep as anyone could. It was most of an hour before I could see again. You got off easy, boy." Then he leaned in close and whispered, "It was real pretty, wasn't it? After a while, you're gonna start thinking that you'd like to take another look. Don't you be tempted, you hear? Don't you even think about it."

"I won't," I said. "I really truly won't." And I meant it. My eyes were still hurting bad. But then, I asked, "What was all that? What did I see?"

"You never mind that. It wasn't nothing."

"It must have been something. It damn near knocked me down."

"Don't you get too curious, boy. It ain't safe. You just follow the rules."

"Just tell me what it was, that's all. So I'll know. And then I won't ever ask again. Promise."

Tallow sighed. "You can't ever talk about this to anyone, you hear? You're not supposed to know. Nobody is. They don't want folks going out to see it for themselves." He lowered his voice. "They call it colors. It's what happens when light gets too bright. Your brain can't handle it. It's called overload or something like that. It's a little piece of madness, is what it is. You don't want to get sucked into it. You won't never get back. You'll just wander out there into the brights and die of your own hallucinations. That's what happened to — never mind."

"Doey?"

"Yeah, that was his name. Damn fool was too smart for his own good. Don't you go getting too smart now, you hear? You just keep remembering how much your face hurt."

"I will."

"You do that. Now that you know, you keep your gloomies on, you hear? And that breathing mask too, so you can't smell anything either. The air is just as bad. And don't say nothing to no one. No matter what. If you know what's good for you."

Tallow felt around under the hood, pulled my goggles back down over my eyes, and then made me check to see that they were properly seated.

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And the breathing mask too. When we were both satisfied, he pulled off the hood. I blinked and looked around. Everything was safely gray again. As long as I didn't think about what was really out there, I was okay. As long as I didn't say what I'd seen, I was okay. I didn't even tell Tallow about the after-image still burning in my eyes. It looked like a naked boy. But he wasn't there when I put the gloomies back on, and I looked around everywhere. And I didn't tell him about the honey-smell either. Through the glasses, the brightlands looked flat and hard and empty. But I didn't have a lot of time for looking. There was too much work to do.

Putting down darklines wasn't hard. Just tedious. Mostly, it was boring.

First, we pounded stakes. The stakes were heavy Y-shaped things anchored in an iron base. The base was pointed like a bee sting. It had to be pounded deep into the ground, three feet or more; then the long leg of the Y part was stuck all the way into it. Then, after all the stakes were in place, we strung the wire, hanging it from one stake to the next.

I didn't do any of the actual stringing, that was done by the others. They had the strength for it, I didn't. I held cable, feeding it out from a big roll so it didn't hang up while the crew manhandled it into position. They used pitchforks so they wouldn't have to touch the line themselves. It was a thick naked braid of wire. The outer threads were deliberately broken and frayed, so the line looked like it had silvery scraggly hair. The wire was supposed to be fuzzy, so the dark would be deeper and stiffer, so I had to wear thick gloves, because the frayed bits had sharp ends. Even with the work gloves, I still got a few pokes and jabs and had to pull a couple of wire splinters from the heel of my palm.

When it was lunch time, we all hiked up the corridor a ways, far enough so that none of the bright could get in, so we could finally take off our gloomies and air-masks. Even here, safe between the dark lines, it still felt too bright. Or maybe that was an after-effect. I didn't ask. There wasn't much to eat, and what there was, wasn't very good. Stale bread, dried up cheese, wilted lettuce. Everything felt tired. Still, it was better than hunger. There wasn't much talk among the work crew. Everybody seemed to have something personal to think about. I thought about the naked boy. Was he really there? No, probly not. How could anyone stand naked in the

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bright? We finished eating as quickly as we could and pulled our goggles and capes back on, then hiked back out into the bright.

When the line was all strung, it was a chest-high fence. Not enough to stop anybody or anything. Least, not until it was turned on. The end of the line split into three separate wires that were fed into a terminator box. They put a terminator box at each end of the line, then they threw first one switch, then the other.

I pointed at the line. "How's it work?"

He waggled his hand. "It's what's called a seduction current. Something like that. It's powered by ambient photons. That's a fancy way of saying it sucks the extra light out of the air. The more light it sucks, the thicker the dark it makes."

"But nothing's happening," I said. The cable hung limp between the stakes.

Tallow grunted. "It takes a while. In a month, there'll be another patch of land safe to grow on. It'll go to the Martins. They might be able to get some winter wheat in. Might be enough to make it to spring."

"Why does it take so long?"

"It has to be slow. Otherwise, it would only make dark during the daytime, and we need the dark at night too. It usually takes a month or so for a line to suck enough light to get up to full strength, but after that, it only gets darker and stronger. Some of the older lines around here have enough residual in them to go for a year or more. Enough time to replace them if they go down. We'll come back out next week and see if it caught. Sometimes the terminator boxes are bad." He stepped over and peered closely at the wire. So did I, but I couldn't see any difference.

"Can I ask you something?"

"What?" Tallow seemed annoyed, like he was getting tired of me.

"How does the line know how much light to suck? What you said about the older lines getting stronger — do they ever suck too much light? Could they make it too dark?"

"Eh?" Tallow squinted, suddenly angry. "Don't you go anywhere with that. We got enough talk already."

"I was just asking — "

"You was just asking too much. That's not safe, boy. Don't ask questions, just follow the rules, you hear?" He strode away from me, began

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loading his tools into his truck. The other men too. Like they couldn't be away from here fast enough. Pretty soon, we all piled into our separate pickups and headed back down the corridor. They dropped me back at Miz's place and that was that.

I worked on the line crews off and on all summer long, when I wasn't mucking out stalls for Miz. Tallow didn't talk to me much, probly afraid he'd already said too much. None of them ever talked to the city boy, so I mostly kept to myself. Every so often, I thought about the colors I'd seen. I wondered if there was a safe way to look at them, a safe way to be naked; but I didn't ask those questions. I didn't ask any questions at all anymore, and I didn't answer any either. I pounded stakes and unrolled wire. One day, I looked at myself in the mirror, I actually had muscles. But I was still hungry all the time. And cold. Miz managed to keep food on the table, but it wasn't a lot. Sometimes we had cornbread. Sometimes just mush. We had eggs too, but the hens weren't laying regular. A couple of times we even had chicken. That was pretty good. We didn't starve, but nobody was getting fat either.

One Sunday, while we were at Meeting, one of the cows wandered into the dark; either she didn't have enough sense to keep away or maybe she was daydreaming the way cows do and the dark just pulled her in. She wasn't in her stall and she wasn't in the field either. I finally found her, ass-end sticking out of the dark, and went running up the hill to the house. It took both me and Miz to drag the cow out, but she was never the same. She wobbled on her feet. She looked like she'd been smacked in the face with a shovel. That night, she fell down in her stall. She wouldn't get up, so the vet came out to look at her. He did some doctor stuff, then took Miz off for a talk.

I didn't hear what they said, but Miz looked angry and frustrated. Finally she nodded her head. The vet came back into the barn and put the cow down. Put a gun to her head and thump, just like a street-killing, execution style. It took all three of us to jack the cow up with a block and tackle. We hung her by the hind legs and cut some veins to drain the blood. The vet opened up her belly and the organs spilled out onto a canvas tarp. Some of it, Miz fed to the hogs, the heart and brains and tongue, she put into a big tub for pickling. I got the feeling she'd done this before, especially the way she stripped off the hide and stretched it out for

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tanning. We left the cow hanging so the meat could age two-three days, you can't eat it right away, it's too tough; hanging makes it more tender. Two days later, the vet came back early with a couple of helpers, and we all started hacking and sawing. We were a week smoking the meat. We pickled some of it too, in great big jars. We didn't eat much of it ourselves though. It didn't taste very good. Like it was old and stale. Even when you put gravy on it. Miz said that was the effect of the dark.

Finally, on Friday, we wrapped and boxed everything we could. On Saturday, Miz and me packed as much as we could fit into the truck and she drove into town, where she traded that cow for hard goods, spices, and even some jars of fruit from somewhere up north. Some people would eat it, she said. Just not us.

Miz didn't take me with that day, she wanted me to stay behind, in case anybody came wandering by. Word was that some brightlanders had wandered through town recently and nobody was sure if they'd moved on yet. I hadn't seen them, but I'd heard about them at Meeting. They all wore long black capes, just dark enough to keep them from going mad, except maybe they were a little mad from all that time in the bright. And maybe they'd come through looking to see if there was anything worth stealing. Maybe they were out there now, just waiting on the other side of the dark. But I didn't think it was the brightlanders Miz was fearing. I think it was our own neighbors. Some of them were real hungry, even eating tree bark. Miz had a big pot of stew simmering on the stove for Sunday's Meeting. Maybe some of them folks wouldn't wait. So I stayed behind, sitting on the front porch, watching the chickens scratching through the remaining patches of grass.

Moments like this, I watched the dark. Sometimes, if you watched it close enough, you could see it move. It looked like it was flowing real slow, like a river of slow time. Sometimes it wasn't all dark, sometimes it was dark gray; that was mostly at night. The dark leaked. It couldn't hold all the light it sucked and some of it seeped back out. Just enough to make everything look like moonlight.

But the closer you got to the dark, the worse you felt, like it wasn't just sucking light, but life as well. Everything close to the dark looked bad, all dusty-dull and shabby, turning gray and old in the gloom. I tried to stay away from it, especially now that I knew how it worked. But there was

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something about it, something I couldn't explain. I always felt like it was pulling me into it. Miz called it dark-sniffing. I had to watch myself. I wondered if someday I'd get so lost in some dream that I'd wander right into it, not even realizing what I was doing. That's what happened to the cow.

That's when the colored boy appeared.

First I smelled flowers. Yellow and pink flowers. Bright red flowers. I stood up, looking around, wondering where the flowers were. Then I saw him.

He stepped out of the dark at the bottom of the hill and started up the path to the house like he lived here. I saw him instantly. He stood out like a flash of the brightlands. Where everything else was gray, he was all the different colors a person could be. He glowed like he was lit from within. He was gold all over. His hair flashed in shades of red and blond; his skin shimmered like sunset. He was shining and naked. I'd never seen anybody so beautiful. He could have come from the far side of the sky. Wherever he'd come from, I wanted to go there. I wanted to glow too.

He came all the way up to the porch. He put one foot on the bottom step, then stopped. I knew who he was. "You Doey?"

He nodded. He held out a hand to me, like inviting me to dance. I was real tempted to take it, he was so beautiful. But I didn't. After a moment, he lowered his hand.

"Was that you I saw in the bright?"

He smiled, a dazzle of happiness. I'd never seen anything like that. It just made me hurt with longing all the more. He was insane, of course. He had to be. How could he not?

"Do you talk?" I asked.

He laughed. A gentle chuckle of sound, like a shared secret. "Yes, I talk. I also sing. I dance. I laugh. Do you?"

Shrug. "I dunno. Never tried. Never had much reason to try."

He stepped up one step. He reached out with his hand. I took a step back. He drew his hand back, then took another step up, this time onto the porch. And this time, when he extended his hand, I didn't move away. With outstretched fingers, he touched my shirt, my chest. Through the faded cotton, I felt a hot rush of feeling I couldn't explain. His eyes met mine. His eyes were green and blue and violet. Not the sad shabby colors

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of the faded flowers around the edges of the old gray house, but the glistening sparkle of the deep edge of the rainbow. His eyes were bright. Everything about him was bright. The touch of his fingers — it felt like he was pumping energy into me. I felt *alivened*. Was this the magic of the bright? Was this how people went crazy? I didn't want the moment to end. I wanted to fall helplessly into it, dissolving into a bath of color, just like Doey.

I reached up with my own hand, took his in mine, held it, felt the warmth, both strong and soft at the same time, released it, reached across and touched his chest as he'd touched me. Placed my palm flat against his hot and glowing body. There was nothing I needed to say, there was everything I wanted to say. There was perfect understanding and a thousand thousand questions. I'd never known a moment like this. Never felt a hot surge of feeling like this. I thought I was going to faint. Or fly apart in pieces.

"Yes," he said, finally.

"Yes?"

"Yes, you know how to sing and dance and laugh. You just haven't had a place to do it."

My mouth was dry as dust. "Will you — can you take me there?"

He smiled and leaned forward. Close enough to kiss. "When you learn to glow."

"How do I — ?"

He touched my lips with a golden finger, silencing my question.

"Hush," he whispered. "Not yet. Not yet."

And then he whirled and spun, a twirl of light and color. He leapt and danced and flew, arms outstretched, all the way down the hill and back into the wall of darkness that surrounded the house. And then he was gone. Leaving only the fading scent of color. The afternoon was dull and gray again. I felt tears on my cheeks. Both joy and despair at the same time.

I almost ran after him, almost. Something held me back. All the words, all the warnings, all the gloom that wrapped the world. He was right. I wasn't ready to let go. Not yet. Not yet. Oh, that bastard boy of color. How did he do that? How could he flirt and fly? How did he live? Where had he gone?

Sank down into a chair, an old wooden chair that creaked in pain as

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it accepted my weight. A faded cushion, hard and flat as cardboard. What mad thing had just happened here? Damn that Doey! I hated him, I loved him, I envied him, I feared what he was, and I wanted to be him more than anything.

I was comfortable here. Working for Miz. Working on the lines. I was comfortable, wrapped in dark. I didn't have to care. I didn't have to think. I only had to follow the rules. I could do that. Okay, I wasn't happy, but I wasn't unhappy either. I was comfortable and after being hungry and tired and cold and uncomfortable for so long, comfortable was a good place to be. It was enough. I didn't need happy. Happy didn't exist anyway. Certainly not here. And then the glowing boy stepped out of the dark and looked in my eyes and touched my heart and left me gasping with desperation. Because now that I knew what happy was, now that I knew it did exist, how could I ever be comfortable again anywhere?

Now that I knew what happy felt like, I also knew I didn't have any. Instead, now I knew what lonely felt like.

Did he know how cruel his words were? "Not yet. Not yet."

I felt so torn up inside I didn't know what I felt. I put my head into my hands and started sobbing, I don't know why. Cried for Ma, cried for me. Cried for the whole stupid everything. Who made up this stupid world anyway? Why did we have to put down all these walls of darkness? What was on the other side that everybody was so afraid of they wouldn't even talk about it? And why did I feel so awful?

After a while, I felt all hollow and empty. So I got up and went to the barn. Stood around for a bit, then finally started mucking out stalls. Not because I wanted to, but it was something to do. And if I didn't do it, Miz would have words, lots of words. I hated all her words. I just never knew it until now.

When Miz got back, she sniffed the air and looked at me sharply. "What happened here?" she asked.

"Nothing," I said.

"Don't lie to me, Michael. Something happened here. I can see it in your face. You're all hot and flushed. Your cheeks are red." She put a hand on my forehead. "You're burning up. You have a fever."

"It's nothing," I said. Maybe too loud.

She grabbed me by the arm and dragged me to the horse trough. "Take

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off your shirt," she demanded. I did so and she pushed me down to my knees, pushed me head first into the sour brown water. She picked up a horse brush and began scrubbing my back with it. I couldn't scream and I couldn't breathe and I was trying to do both at the same time. She yanked me up, gasping. Before I could stop myself, I called her all those words she'd made me promise never to say again. She didn't even hesitate, she just whacked me across the head with the heavy wooden brush, knocking me backward.

"You're still an evil old bitch! And beating me to death ain't gonna change that."

"You think I'm stupid?" Miz shouted. She was loud. "You think I don't see what you're turning into? You want to go out there and get colored? You want to glow? You want to turn into some kind of fairy dancer? You want to die in delirium? Why do you think we put up all the darklines? Because we like the dark? You think we like being cold and hungry and miserable all the time? No, we do it because we don't have any choice. We have to protect ourselves. All of us. Even you — you stupid city boy."

I didn't say what I was thinking. She made me feel angry. But what if she was right? Everything was all confused. If the dark was so good, why did it feel so bad. And if the bright was so bad, why did it feel so good? I pulled myself bitterly back to my feet. Already, I was trying to figure out how I could get away from here. I could probly get a loaf of bread out of the kitchen, maybe some vegetables, put them in an old potato sack or something. But where could I go? And how could I get there? Walk the roads? Maybe, but to where? And if anybody else came down the road, they'd see me for sure. No place to hide in the corridors. Follow the train tracks? Maybe. But where did they go? Just to another place like this. I didn't know. I needed a map or something. But there had to be someplace somewhere better than this. I shook the water out of my hair, brushed it back with my hand. My arm and shoulder hurt where she'd slammed me against the trough. My back hurt from the scrubbing of the brush. And my head was throbbing like a nightmare. I hurt all over. And I stank of the foul water. And I was cold. Evening was coming on, and the dark was expanding.

Out in the barn, wrapped in a blanket, shivering against the night, listening to the wind scrabbling against the old wood, all the voices argued

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back and forth. Evil old bitch. I don't care what she thinks. This is sick. Everything is sick. These people are dying. I don't want to die with them. They're all sick and dirty and dead inside. I don't want to be like this. But there's no way out. It's a trap. All the darklines, all the rules, all the walls everywhere.

And just what's out there on the other side of the lines anyway? What's so horrible that you can't look at it direct, can't see it without being eye-poisoned? Doey wasn't wearing any gloomies. He was naked like one of those angels in the old books. He was as beautiful as a girl with long flowing red hair, but he was stallion-cut like a prize. He was both at once. I'd never seen anyone or anything like that. How did he live out there? How did he see without being blinded? What did he say? Learn to dance. No. Learn to glow. How do you glow? How do you learn? All those questions, and nobody to ask. Nobody to trust.

Next morning was Meeting. I wasn't going to go, but Miz didn't take no arguments. She just told me to clean myself up, put on a clean shirt, and not go around smelling like a pig. But once we were in the truck, she did say one thing. She said, "I didn't want to hurt you yesterday, Michael. What I did, I had to do. I had to break the spell. You were all glassy. I had to dunk you in the water and scrub your back hard and smack you to put you in all that pain to pull you back from wherever it was you were drifting off to. I've seen that look before, saw it on Doey. Didn't act fast enough with him. He danced away one night. Ain't going to lose you too. I see you starting to glow, I'm going to beat you — not because I want to hurt you, but because hurting you is the only way to pull you out. You understand that, don't you?"

"Yes'm. Whatever."

We pulled up at Meeting early, but we wasn't the first ones there. Bunch of folks all clustered by their trucks, talking. They looked over as we drove up, and a couple of them walked over to talk to Miz. She glanced at me, then moved off a ways so I couldn't hear what they were all saying. I pretended like I didn't care anyway and wandered down to where the older kids were scratching in the dirt with sticks. J.D. was there, the kid with the broken tooth, the kid from town who'd first told me about Doey. Nobody had names out here, only initials. He stopped what he was doing, tossed his stick aside, and said, "You hear?"

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"Hear what?"

"'Bout the Trasks?"

"What about them?"

"They went out."

"Out where?"

"You stupid, city boy? Out."

"Oh. Out."

"Doc drove over to see if they was all right, if they had enough food. He had a couple spare bags of beans and rice. He got there, they was all gone. The whole family. Ever single one. Even the baby. And one of their fields was starting to glow. Big hole in the darklines — all snapped, like somebody cut 'em. Doc didn't have no gloomies. He got out of there fast. Scared-like. That's what I heard, anyway. They're going to send out a hunting party, I bet. Go shoot some bright-eyes. They're going to need every gun in town. You know how to shoot, city boy?"

"I can shoot," I said.

"Then you'll get to go, for sure. They won't let me go. I already asked. They said I was too small. That's a damn lie. They just ain't forgiven my pa for losin' a gun last hunt. They say he stole it. But he din't. The brighties did. Turned it into something weird, I bet."

"How would you know?"

"I know lotsa stuff. More than you."

"Yeah? You think so?"

"I know so."

"Yeah? How do you know anything? You ever been out there?"

He shook his head. "Not gonna say what I know."

I wanted to tell him about the bright-eyed boy. I wanted to ask him if he'd ever seen the naked colors. But something told me that probly wasn't a good idea. So I just shrugged. Whatever. Drop it. Turned away, back to the others. More folks was arriving now. I hiked up the hill to where Tallow was standing, waited behind him for a bit until no one else was talking. He finally noticed me. "You want something?"

"You going hunting?"

"You got a gun?"

"Miz does, I think."

He scratched his neck thoughtfully. "Probly not a good idea. You

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being a city boy. And we're going out deep. Miz won't like that. But maybe you can hold the wire at the safe end. Might could use you that way. You just don't say nothing right now. You talkin' about it just makes a bad idea seem worse."

Then Miz came over with Doc. He looked at me, took my chin in his hand, turned my head side to side. Looked into my eyes. Put a hand on my forehead. Asked me to stand on one foot, put my arms out, and shut my eyes tight. Stuff like that. Turned to Miz. "He looks all right to me. You probly got to him in time. But if you want me to wrap him in darkline for a bit, suck some of the brightness out of him, bring him by one day, and we'll give him a bit of treatment."

"I'll do that, thanks," she said. "You be in tomorrow?"

"Better wait till the end of the week," he said. "It's going to be a busy few days. Let's get this Trask business taken care of first. I think this lad will be fine for the moment."

Eventually, we all got inside and got settled, but nobody was thinking about Meeting. Everybody was still whispering. It was like the room was full of bluebottle flies. The mayor said that he was sorry about the bad news, everybody had probly heard it anyway, but he had to officially confirm it. The darklines had broken by the Trask farm and it looked as if the Trasks had been enchanted. And yes, there would be a committee meeting to decide what to do next. Volunteers should make themselves known to the usual folks.

After that, there wasn't much else to say, because nobody was listening anyway, so we broke up early. Folks didn't eat much, they was mostly too upset. The whole family was gone, even the baby. Not even bodies left for a proper funeral. Lots of talk floated around. Somebody was going to have to get out there and take care of the livestock. Miz said she could take the cows and the chickens if nobody else needed them, but she didn't want no more pigs right now. They ate too much. A couple of the other folks spoke up, laying claim to tools or dishes or furniture. Blankets and quilts. Pots and pans. A little of this and some of that. Eventually, it was all sorted out, who was going to go out and pick stuff up. Tallow opened his truck and passed out gloomies to the folks who were going to need them.

Miz collected goggles and masks for us and some capes too, shiny on

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one side, black on the other. And gloves, just in case. We didn't even head home, just straight out through town and off around the hill to the Trask place. I don't know how Miz knew the way. All the corridors looked the same to me, just narrow twisty roads through the dark. But I tried to pay attention anyway, just in case. Miz kept talking, the whole trip. She was angry about everything. "Should never have let the Trasks settle so far out, way out on the borders with nothing between them and the bright. Damn fool stupid idea from the start. And now a whole family is lost. And the farm. And it's not like we have families or farms to spare. Lord knows what shape the poor animals are in. Put your goggles and mask on, boy. We're almost there. And you put that cape and gloves on before you get out of the car, you hear?"

She pulled up short of the farm and pulled on her own cape and goggles and gloves and breathing mask. She pushed the goggles up on her forehead and inched the truck forward, a little bit at a time. I pushed my gloomies up just enough to see under the frames. We came around the last curve and there was the brightness leaking in around the edges of the broken dark. We both pulled our goggles down at the same time. "I told you to keep those things on. You're susceptible. You can't take any more chances."

We pulled up in front of the barn. It was old and saggy. It leaned to one side and it looked like it was ready to collapse, even worse than Miz's barn. Miz looked off toward the bright before getting out of the truck. Half the darkline was down, the dark just faded off into filigree wisps. Beyond, the fields glowed harsh and stark in our gloomies. Without the goggles, they would have been impossible to look at.

Miz made a clucking sound of disapproval. I followed her into the barn. There were three cows tethered, all of them lowing uncomfortably. Miz told me to load up the sacks of feed, while she set about milking the cows. Afterward, I loaded the cans into the truck. Then she blindfolded the cows and led them out of the barn, tying their tethers to the back of the truck. Then she went and found a stack of empty crates and we began collecting the chickens. Some of them were clucking quietly in the barn, those we crated; but others were lying stunned on the ground outside. A few were wandering around dazed. Those she picked up and swiftly broke their necks.

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"Can't they be saved?" I asked.

Miz shook her head. "Too dangerous. Too much bright in 'em. This is better. Safer." There were a few little chicks too, all safe in the incubator. She put these in a crate, dropped a canvas over it, and I loaded the crate into the back of the pickup. We walked around the barn then, looking to see what else we could find. The two pigs in the back were both gone. Miz shook her head at that. "Probly ran into the bright. Pigs are like that," she said.

Then we saw it. The fourth cow. It was staggering, all glassy-eyed and confused. It looked bright — not as bright as the brightland, but brighter than it should be. Miz said one of those words I'm not supposed to. She went to the truck and pulled out her shotgun from the back window.

"Don't you want to walk it into the barn?"

"What for?"

"That's a lot of meat — "

"Nobody's going to eat this beef. It's sick. You want to get sick too?"

"Can't you have Doc wrap it in darkline and drain the bright out of it?"

"You can't drain it. Draining takes the flavor out. And you can't let people eat meat that's been brightened either. That's even worse. No, this cow is gone." She lifted the shotgun, moved closer, then moved closer again, until the barrel was almost touching the cow's skull. I didn't want to see it, but I couldn't look away either. The rifle flashed. The cow dropped to the ground with a thud. She stepped closer and fired the second barrel. Just to be sure.

Miz checked the house then. She wouldn't let me go in, but she came out carrying a pillow case full of spices and other things from the kitchen. Even a small jar of honey, I found out later. That was a surprise. The Trasks weren't supposed to be doing that well.

Back in the truck, barely inching along the road, not moving faster than the three tethered cows could follow, Miz started talking again. She looked old. Older than the first day. And tired too. Like she'd been drained a few times. "This isn't right," she said. "Letting cows and pigs and chickens and corn go bad like that. And all those vegetables. Nobody should have been out this far, with only one line of dark between them and that — that brightmare. Now look what it's gone and done. A family gone,

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a cow gone. Two pigs running loose in the bright. All those chickens. All that food. What a waste. What a waste."

It took most of the day to bring the cows in. It was a long drive and we couldn't go very fast. But we were back before dusk settled in. I was glad of that. I didn't like being out in the dark. Not any kind of dark at all.

I slept badly. Tossed and turned in the straw all night. Finally, just before dawn, I got up and walked out of the barn. I tried to look up at the stars. Once in a while, you can still see them, some of them, but not tonight. Everything was black. Just dim shapes of black against blacker. I thought about lighting a lantern, but I didn't want to wake Miz, so I just stood barefoot and listened. Nothing much to hear. Just wind. A lonely cricket. Not a lot of insects anymore. I heard that one in town. That was the real reason everything was dying. The insects couldn't get through the darklines. No bees, no ants, no bugs, no spiders, nothing.

Not even a glimmer of bright from over the hill. Sometimes you can see it, mostly its reflection off the clouds. But not tonight.

Finally, I went back into the barn, back to my straw. Pulled my blanket around me and just sat with my arms wrapped around my knees, rocking softly. I used to do that when I was little. I don't remember much from when I was little, we moved around so much. But I remember I spent a lot of time sitting in the dark and rocking. Sometimes Mom would come and sit with me, wrapping her arms around me, and we'd sit as quiet as we could, not making any noises, so they wouldn't find us.

Thought about what I'd seen. Everything. All the bright leaking over into the fields. Miz didn't know, but while she was milking the cows, I'd lifted up the edge of my gloomies and snuck a quick peek — not at the bright directly, but at the fields it was just creeping into. That didn't hurt so much. I could see the colors, all the dazzling colors, everything at once — the rustling golden corn in the field, the crisp green stalks so clear it was like they cut the air, the rich dark soil like a warm bed, even the sky above glowed blue. I'd never even known such colors were possible. I wanted to see more. But then, I heard a noise behind me and just as quick-like I pushed the goggles back down over my eyes. I didn't want to get caught. Not by Miz. Because Miz wanted to take me to Doc. And wrap me in darkline. And drain the bright out of me. Like the beef. Drained beef. "You

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ever taste drained beef? You won't like it." Maybe that's what's wrong with these people. They've all been drained.

But what if Miz hadn't made a noise right then? Would I have kept looking until it was too late, until I was sucked away into the brightland too? I wondered what that might feel like — to dance naked in the stars. To whirl and dazzle and laugh. Madness, yes. But even madness looked better than this life. Miz wanted to wrap me in dark and make me just like everybody else. My stomach rumbled and I wondered what people ate in the brightlands. Magic corn? Enchanted beans? I didn't know. Nobody knew. Anybody who knew hadn't come back to tell. Maybe they was all dead, lying bright and starved? Maybe the bright pigs was eating them. Maybe this and maybe that and maybe some of the other. Nobody knew. Or if they did, they wasn't saying.

Finally, I just rolled over, curled up and tried to sleep. Thinking about stuff doesn't do any good. It doesn't work. It just makes my head hurt. Enough. Enough already. I wrapped myself tight in my blanket and eventually shivered myself to sleep.

For the next couple days, Miz didn't say anything more about getting me darklined, but I knew she was still set on the idea. She kept giving me these looks. But maybe she also felt bad about having to do it, because she made some honey-cornbread and cut me an extra thick slab with lots of butter. Or maybe she just felt I had to have my strength up so I could survive being drained. She didn't say. And I didn't ask. I was starting to think about running again. We still had the gloomies and the capes in the truck. Maybe if I could find my way to the Trask farm, I could go outside the darklines and cross the bright to some other place. Supposedly, the town council had some maps somewhere, but nobody was allowed to see them.

Tuesday evening, Tallow came driving up unexpectedly. He talked with Miz a bit, then told me to get into the truck. Tomorrow morning, we were going out to fix the darkline at the Trask farm. And maybe do a bit of hunting too. Miz sniffed unhappily. I could see she disapproved. She didn't trust any of this. She came right out and said it. "That boy's got too much bright in him. He ain't been drained. If you don't tie him down good, you know he'll just get sucked into the colors. I swear, you lose him and I'll skin you bad, Tallow, I will."

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"Nah, you'll just get another one off the next train. Like you always do." Tallow grinned back.

Miz didn't think that was funny. She sniffed again in that funny way she had. "Oh, hell. Wait a minute." She went to her own truck and pulled the rifle down out of the back window, and the box of shells next to it. She cracked it open and popped the two shells out, dropping them into the box. She walked back over, and motioned me to open my door. She handed me the shotgun and the box of shells. "Don't you load this thing unless you need it. And you bring it back clean, y'hear? Tallow, you teach him how to use it. It's on your head now."

Tallow grunted and climbed into the truck. He pulled his door shut and put the engine into gear. We rolled down the hill and into the corridor of twisted dark. Tallow laughed. "Miz is good folks, but some folks say she's been drained one too many times."

I thought about that. It kind of made sense. "You ever been drained?" I asked.

"Most folks around here have. For their own good."

"Oh," I said.

"It doesn't really hurt. It just makes you queasy, a little. Like having the runs, sort of. After a couple days, the feeling goes away. And the bright can't get to you as easy."

"Did the bright ever get to you? I mean, before you were drained?"

Tallow's face tightened. "Y'know, boy. This ain't really anything you want to talk about. You don't want to go asking too many questions. Folks'll start talkin'."

"Just curious, that's all."

"Yep, that's all. That's what they all said. Just curious. You don't want to get too curious about the bright. You want to stay away from it. That's why we smacked you with it the first day on the lines — so's you'll know. You've seen all you need to see. Right?" When I didn't answer, he repeated himself. "*Right?*"

I shrugged. "Whatever."

Tallow stopped the truck with a screech. I jerked forward with the suddenness of the stop. He turned to me and grabbed my shoulder hard. "Listen up, city boy. You don't know what you're dealing with here. That ain't a question. It's the truth. You don't know shit. So when I tell you how

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it is, I'm not just running my mouth 'cause I like hearing my jaw flap. I'm telling you what you need to know so you don't get sucked away like all the others. We used to be three times as many people and ten times as much livestock and crops. Where do you think all those folks went? All those animals? They didn't listen and they didn't take care and now they're gone. You want to be gone too? Just keep asking questions. You ask too many questions, we'll open the dark and toss you out in the bright ourselves. This is for your own good, city boy. If you want to live, you better learn to listen."

"I thought you liked me," I said. I didn't know why I said that.

"This ain't about liking. Even if I didn't like you, I wouldn't want to see you turn into one of them damn fairy dancers."

"You've seen them?"

Tallow didn't answer. He let go of my shoulder and turned away and put the truck back into gear. I rubbed where he'd grabbed me so hard.

"You didn't answer my question."

"That's right. I didn't." Tallow didn't say anything else for the rest of the drive. That left me with lots of time to think about all the things he wasn't saying. I got the feeling he knew more than it was safe for anyone to know. And maybe he didn't want anyone else to know how much he knew. But it was only a feeling and he'd made it real clear that he wasn't going to answer any more questions of any kind. I felt bad about that. Because maybe if he'd said he'd seen a fairy dancer, I could tell him I'd seen one too. And maybe then we'd each have someone we could trust enough to talk about it. Except I didn't dare tell him, because he might tell someone else; and he couldn't risk saying anything to me either, because I was just another stupid city boy.

"We going out tonight?"

"Tomorrow. Early morning. But I don't have time to drive out and pick you up then, so you'll sleep behind the feed store tonight with some of the other boys. You keep your hands to yourself, you keep your mouth shut, and you don't ask any questions. I'll keep Miz's shotgun in my truck. No sense in having you shoot yourself in the foot, or anybody else either."

Behind the feedstore, it was just a big empty space under a sagging roof. A few bags of feed, here and there, just enough to make a rough bed.

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It wasn't much, but it was better than straw. Four or five others talking together, nothing important. I recognized two of them, but J.D. was the only one whose name I knew. They glanced at me, but didn't say anything. Just another city boy, using up space, eating up food. I grabbed a stretch of canvas to use as a blanket and made myself comfortable off in a corner, away from the others. They had a kerosene lamp, but that was all. The light pretended to warmth, but the night was just as cold here as anywhere else.

After a while, J.D. wandered over, wrapped in a blanket. "Hey, city boy. Can I sleep by you?"

Shrugged. Not yes, not no. J.D. pushed a couple of feed bags into position and stretched out on top of them. "You know something you're not saying." It wasn't a question.

I didn't answer.

"If you tell me what you know, I'll tell you what I know."

I rolled over on my side, turned away from him. I trusted him less than anybody. J.D. liked to talk, liked to pretend he knew stuff. Safest not to tell him anything.

"Aw, c'mon — "

"Fine. Okay. You go first."

"No, you," he insisted.

"Forget it then." I settled myself again.

Silence for a bit. Just enough time for me to figure out what was going on. They'd sent J.D. over to find out what I knew, if I'd ever seen anything.

A minute more and I figured out the rest of it. It didn't matter what I said. J.D. was going to make something up for me.

"Okay," he said. "I'll tell you. Folks keep seein' Doey. Miz's other boy. He's a fairy dancer now. We're goin' out to find him. Hunt him down like a blind pig. That's what my maw says — "

I sat up and looked at him. "J.D. Go away. Get away from me. You got devil-talk inside you and I don't want to hear it. Get away from me or I'll punch you." I said it loud enough for the others to hear. That was enough. J.D. gathered up his blanket and went scuttling back to the others.

He hadn't told me anything I didn't know already. It wasn't that hard to figure out. Even the rest of it, the part he hadn't said. Not just Doey, but

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the Trask family too, if they were still alive. Anyone and anything in the brightlands. Didn't need to be smart to figure that out. Just scared and angry and tightened up inside.

But something about this didn't feel right. Going out and shooting people. Even if they were all colored. No matter how little you felt inside. Just fix the darklines, that's all. Put up more lines if you have to. But going out into the bright. That didn't sound like a good idea. Not for this reason, not for any reason. Not unless you were planning to never come back. I just wish I knew more about what was out there. But if anybody around here knew, they weren't saying, and it sure wasn't safe to ask.

Next thing I knew, Tallow was kicking me awake. "Time to go, city boy. Move your ass." I rolled off the sack of feed onto the hard black dirt. It looked as dark in here as it was out there, but Tallow was waving a lantern, and that outlined everything in brown gloom. Two other men were kicking the rest of the boys awake. I didn't see J.D. anywhere.

I pulled myself to my feet, scratching and aching and hurting all over. My stomach hurt the worst. "Is there anything to eat?" Nobody answered.

I followed them all around the building to the front, where six or seven trucks had pulled up. Somebody had set up a table with a big plate of hard biscuits and even some hot coffee, seven or eight men just lining up. I fell in line behind them, then got pushed even further back when three more arrived. "Wait your turn, city boy. Let the men eat first." Pigs.

Bitter coffee and a couple of biscuits later, they formed up teams. I recognized most of the men from the darkline team, plus a few folks from Meeting. And a couple of the big stocky women too. Some of them had guns. This wasn't any darkline crew.

After a bit of discussion, people figuring out who was going to ride with who, that kind of stuff, Tallow pointed me toward one of the trucks, and I climbed into the back with two other boys. I said hello, but they ignored me. After a few last-minute instructions, the trucks all headed out toward the Trask place. The headlights of the ones following us made an ominous line snaking through the dark.

We couldn't drive very fast, it wasn't safe, so by the time we arrived, the sky was just starting to show an edge of gray — or maybe it was the glow off the distant brightness. I couldn't be sure, and I wasn't going to ask. We stopped down the hill from the Trask place and safely behind the bend

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in the road, so no one would accidentally get a glimpse of brightness before they got their goggles on.

We bumbled around in the gloom for a while, while the Sheriff and a couple of others organized everybody into teams. I was pushed over to stand with Tallow. He was carrying Miz's gun as well as his own, but he made no move to give it to me. I wasn't sure why I was even here, nobody was talking to me.

Finally, everything was sorted out and we all put on our shiny capes and our gloomies and our breathing masks and we started off. We trudged up the last of the road, around the bend of the corridor of dark, and finally up the hill to where the ground was starting to glow. And beyond that, we could see where the glare was leaking into the air from the brightlands. Kind of like the dazzle of light from an open refrigerator in a midnight kitchen.

Two of the men rolled a cart with three huge spools of darkwire on it. For some reason, everybody kept close to the cart. Even though the wire wasn't powered, folks still acted like they were safer staying close to it. Once we got to the top of the hill, I looked around for the dead cow, but where I thought it should be, I saw only a hump, covered with little white flowers. We all waited while the Sheriff and his deputies looked out across the brightland through special binoculars. They whispered to themselves for a bit, pointing and nodded and finally agreeing. After some more conferences, the guys with the cart installed one end of the wire to a convenient post; they hooked up a terminator box to it, there was another terminator connected to the end of the wire inside the big drum.

Then, when that was done, we all headed out into the bright, with the cart leading and the men unspooling the wire as they went. We didn't install any posts, we weren't putting up a darkline. This was only a safety line. All you had to do was follow it back. You could do it with your eyes closed, if you had to. I hoped I wouldn't have to. Just the little bit of leakage around the edge of my goggles was painful.

Nobody told me where we were headed, so I just followed Tallow. At least, I thought it was Tallow. In the harsh glare, with all of us caped and goggled, everybody looked alike, all different shades of gray and white and whiter. To keep from stumbling, I spent most of the time watching the ground directly in front of me, following in the footsteps of the man I

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thought was Tallow. We hiked into the brightness where the ground turned white like salt — that's what it looked like through the gloomies; it must have been glittering gold without them.

We hiked through scorched fields, abandoned to the bright. An old dirt road cut straight through, but it was already starting to get overgrown. On either side, twisted trees groped in the glare. They looked like they were alive, their limbs slowly moving, waving, even reaching. We kept clear of them. And the bushes too — they looked like they were all burning. They were so bright, even the gloomies couldn't keep out all the color. They looked burnished with a hint of red and gold, like they were all wrapped in shivering flame. Everywhere else, I saw stalks of something that might have been corn once, but was something else now; they looked like torches.

None of this made much sense to me. How was anybody going to hunt anything in a place like this? Ten feet away, everything blurred out in yellow and white. It was like fog on fire. And nobody was saying much either. If they knew what they were doing, they weren't telling.

Finally, someone in front of me stopped and pointed. A couple of others stopped, so I did too. At first, I couldn't see what they were looking at, but finally I made it out, way out there, way beyond the place where the road just dazzled out, there was a tall old house, an outline of a house, a glimmering hint of a house. I guessed that was where we were heading, I tried to make it out clearer — but then somebody punched me in the back and growled, "Keep moving, bait." So I pushed on.

It was hot out here. Once, I tried looking off to the east, tried to see the Sun, the source of all this brightness, but the gloomies just went black. They overloaded and shut down. And I had to walk blind for a few moments until they reset themselves.

Eventually, we reached the house. It was in a field of grass so bright that the goggles showed it black, they didn't even try to resolve it. The house itself looked like it was made out of glass. The walls had gone glistening and transparent, and all we could see clearly was just the structural outlines, the edges and corners. It looked like it had been here forever, standing tall and stately, with porches and gables and even a widow's walk around the front and sides. And a tall cupola. It was almost a castle. Even Miz's house wasn't this big.

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The two men with the cart cut the wire and tied one end of it to one of the porch posts. Once they did that everybody felt safer. A few folks started to go up onto the porch, but Sheriff stopped them, said the house was off-limits to everybody. Except the lure.

Then everybody busied themselves, separating into three teams. Each team had a cart and a roll of wire. Each team tied one end of their wire to the porch, connected a terminator, then headed out a bit and waited. One team was pointed straight out south, the other two east and west.

Tallow was on the western team, but when I went to follow, he grabbed me by the arm and walked me back to the house. "No, your job is to wait here and make sure nothing happens to the wires."

"By myself?"

"Nothing's going to happen. You're perfectly safe. You have four active darkwires terminating here."

"Then why do you need me to stay here? I thought I was going with you."

"I promised Miz."

"Then give me the gun."

"You won't need it."

"Then why'd she give it?"

"Stop asking so many questions. Go sit up on the porch. You'll be able to see farther."

"Can't see anything in this bright. Neither can you. And why'd he call me 'bait?' I'm the lure, aren't I?"

Tallow grabbed my shoulder. Hard. Just like last time. "Listen to me, city boy. If we take you out there, you'll get sucked away so fast you won't have time to scream for help. You stay here because I say you stay here. And if you want to argue about it, we can tie you down with darkline. And that won't be just an hour of draining, it could be a day or two or forever. You want that?"

I didn't answer. Not right away. "You say nothing will happen?"

"Nothing will happen."

"You sure?"

"Get up on the porch. Oh, wait — " He fumbled under his cape, passed me a sack. "Here's some more biscuits and a bottle of water. In case you get hungry."

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"How long are you going to be out there?"

"As long as it takes." And then, he added. "Probly back by afternoon, certainly before nightfall. We don't want to spend the night out here, that's for sure; this place glows in the dark. You just stay awake and make sure those wires stay tied." He started to turn away, then turned back. "You'll be all right."

And then he was gone. All of them were gone. They hiked out into the bright and faded away in the distance like wavering shadows.

Tallow said I could go up on the porch, but I wasn't sure it was safe. The Sheriff hadn't let anybody else go up there. But maybe that was just because he didn't want anything disturbed. What the hell. I put one foot on the glassy first step. It held. Another foot on the next step. It held too. One more step and I was on the porch. It felt yellow everywhere. Dusty yellow. And it smelled of sweet sharp lemons. Even through the mask. And honey. And honeysuckle. And green melons. It was wonderfully delicious. Could the men out in the fields smell it too? What kept them from ripping off their masks and rolling around in the delicious air?

And the sounds — now that I wasn't surrounded by hulking men with their three-day sweaty stinks, the underfoot crunching of dirty boots, the lumbering hooves of upright beasts, the clatter of machinery and the stink of gun oil — now that all of that was gone, I could hear the tinkling music of translucent leaves, rustling in the delicate touch of the breeze. The wind sang like a distant chorus, very faint and far away. Silvery insects rattled and buzzed. And now, much nearer, something soft and small kept calling, "*Hoo-hooo, hoo-hoooo.*" I wanted to go looking for it, whatever it was — bird or cricket or owl, I didn't know, but it sounded like the voice at the edge of the world, but so close by now that I wanted to find it, wanted to peer over the edge and see what was there on the other side. It felt like it was just around the corner.

This probly wasn't a good idea, thinking like this. I wondered if I would be safer inside the house? Maybe inside, I'd be out of the wind and away from all the flavors sweeping across the fields. Cinnamon and musk and jasmine. How did I even know all those different scents?

The doorknob glittered like diamond. I turned it and the door swung open. Inside, the house was silent, still, and empty. No furniture here, only an empty shell, a suggestion of a life once lived, exploded outward

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into solar dazzle and flare. The windows glowed with the creeping brightness of the world outside. The light felt muted here. I wondered if it would be safe to take off my clothes and dance in here.

I wandered from room to room, touching each wooden or metal or glass surface. The doors, the walls, the glass of the mirrors. Everything tingled. My fingers caressed. I didn't remember taking off my gloves. I wasn't even sure where I'd left them. This wasn't good. I shouldn't be doing this. All the voices in my head were screaming. Run away, now! Grab the wire and head back into the dark. Don't get sucked away. But all the songs were singing even louder. The music whirled and roared. Come dance aloft, be free. Be clear. I cowered shivering under my cape. Eyes clenched shut against the fiery noise. The smells of sweet apricots and cream and gently scented candles. Overwhelmed, I held myself and counted, one and two and three and breathe and one and two and three and breathe —

No. No. I wouldn't give in. Not going to get sucked away. Never. Ever. Didn't come this far to be a golden bird fairy dancer. All the walls are here for a reason. The carefully constructed dark, the comfortable black essence of nothing at all.

Upstairs, the house is wide open. Tall windows with billowing white drapes, open to the balcony surrounding the house. Outside, the view went on forever. So bright below, so clear up here. Out to the horizon, the sparkling fields, the waves of rippling air, the colors sparkling and dancing. If I take off my cape, I can feel it like the comforting radiance of the refiner. I stand, arms outstretched to feel the heat, the delicious soul-filling heat. It soaks into my flesh, heals my bones, warms my spirit. I giggle at the wash of sensation. I can feel myself glowing.

In the cupola, I twirl alone. Naked and free. Finally warm, and finally here. The frozen winter of my past retreats before the blasting Sun. I thaw and come alive. Joyously alive. I laugh with silly pleasure. I am enchanted. The delight of heat.

Am I ready to see? Can I take off the goggles?

Here on the fenced roof of the cupola, the highest part of the house, I can see the world as far as the darklands, the carefully drawn boundaries of exclusion, every tiny little line etched into the face of the land like the wrinkles of time. The gloom of fear.

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In the other direction, out toward the east, the south, the west, the land sparkles and shimmers. It dances with light and aliveness. Why would anyone try to hide from all this laughter?

I peeked under the glasses. It wasn't pain I felt, it was color, bright color, brightness overwhelming. It wasn't pain at all, just the sudden shock of coming alive after being dead so long. An awakening from the grave of gloom.

Lift the glasses slowly. Eyes ready to clench. At first, the dazzle startles. A splash of intensity. Hold my hand in front of my eyes — I can see through my fingers — I am translucent. Pink and gold and glistening. I have taken on the colors of the world. The crimson of my blood gives my skin a rosy blush. The blue of my veins resonates. I am a roseate glow of violet and vermilion. I lower my hand, and all the rest of the colors of the world flood in. All the smells and sensations. All the wonderful noises. All the heat and the light and the delicious flood of everything roiling together in a cascading symphony of being.

As I focus, I see...them. They've been there all along. Waiting for me. I just couldn't see them until now. Laugh and wave in radiant delight. They recognize me as one of them now. The dancing one is Doey. The others, also dancing, used to be the Trasks. I can hear the children singing.

And then, without passing through the intervening space, I am down among them, laughing with them. A moment of pause. Doey and I, face to face. Can I dance with you now? What a silly question. We're already dancing.

There are men with guns, hunting you. Hunting us. I wave toward the horizon. Doey laughs. He holds up the ends of the darkwires. The terminator boxes have been removed. The wires are dead — no, not dead, coming alive, infusing with clarity. Even metal can be bright.

Doey sparkles. Laugh with me and we'll dance the ends of these wires out to the distant south, out into the solar dazzle. Anyone who follows these lines will end up enchanted in the luminous day. The men will either dance or die. Whatever they choose. Doey twirls and passes out the tingling wires. I join him singing.

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CURIOSITIES

TOM'S A-COLD, BY JOHN COLLIER (1933)

JOHN Collier is remembered today for brilliant fantasy short stories like "The Chaser" or "Thus I Refute Beelzy" or "Green Thoughts," cheerfully ironic miniatures with stings in their tails about magic shops and deals with the devil and man-eating plants in domestic greenhouses.

In *Tom's A-Cold* (published in the U.S. as *Full Circle*), Collier's only attempt at what might be called science fiction, the ironies are dark indeed, and have a real human cost.

The novel takes place in 1995, in a post-holocaust England which has regressed to a medieval level, divided into townships that are in most cases little more than gangs. Young Harry has grown up in a valley in Hampshire, under the egotistic rule of the Chief. Harry is the most charismatic of the young men of the village, and his best friend Crab is the most subtle thinker. Harry's grandfather, called Father by all, has ambitions to restore civilization if he can maneuver Harry into power, despite the young man's ambivalence. The opportunity comes when the men of the valley raid a town near Swindon to steal away women for the young men. In the course of summer and fall Harry becomes Chief, but at the cost of everything he cares about.

Harry's love for Rose, one of the captured women, and her reluctant love for him, has heartbreaking force. Against a vivid portrayal of the English landscape, the characters work at tragic cross purposes. From a harrowing scene of the use of an ancient hypodermic to attempt to cure the wounded Chief, to the final conversation between Father and Harry about the unknowability of the human heart, Collier limns a tragedy of Shakespearian overtones, one of the great unknown works of twentieth-century future fiction.

—John Kessel

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Meet Me in the Moon Room

Ray Vukcevich

1931520011 $16

Ray Vukcevich's Philip K. Dick Award-nominated debut collection contains thirty-three weird, wonderful stories concerning men, women, teleportation, wind-up cats, and brown paper bags. By turns whimsical and unsettling—frequently managing to be both—these short fictions describe family relationships, bad breakups, and travel to outer space.

Ingenious with the short-story form. Although the stories read as playful vignettes, Vukcevich covertly works in ideas of self, identity, destiny, and obsession. And occasionally, the dangers of outer space.
—*Review of Contemporary Fiction*

A master of radical recombinations, drawing from (amongst others) the Brothers Grimm, Dickens, Lewis Carroll, Kafka, O.Henry, Dali, Asimov, pulpish space opera, and the latest in nanotech to produce works that are all his own.—*Locus* (Best Books of the Year)

Inventive and entertaining, these stories yield more emotional truth than much more comparatively realistic fiction.—*Publishers Weekly*

Funny, savage stories, all flint and steel, scraps of flannel, pratfalls and prideful weirdness, sparks falling away into darkness.—James Sallis

What other writer could make you start laughing halfway down the first page of a story about a man putting on a sweater? Thurber, maybe, a long time ago. Buy this book.—Damon Knight

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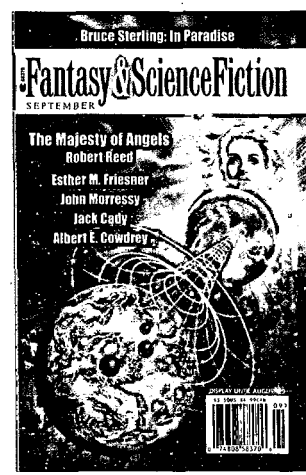

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